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Aruba TODAY

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FED TO EASE US STIMULUS

MARTIN CRUTSINGER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve has sent its strongest signal of confidence in the U.S. economy since the Great Recession struck six years ago: It's decided the economy is finally strong enough to withstand a slight pullback in the Fed's stimulus.



Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke speaks at the Federal Reserve in Washington, Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013.

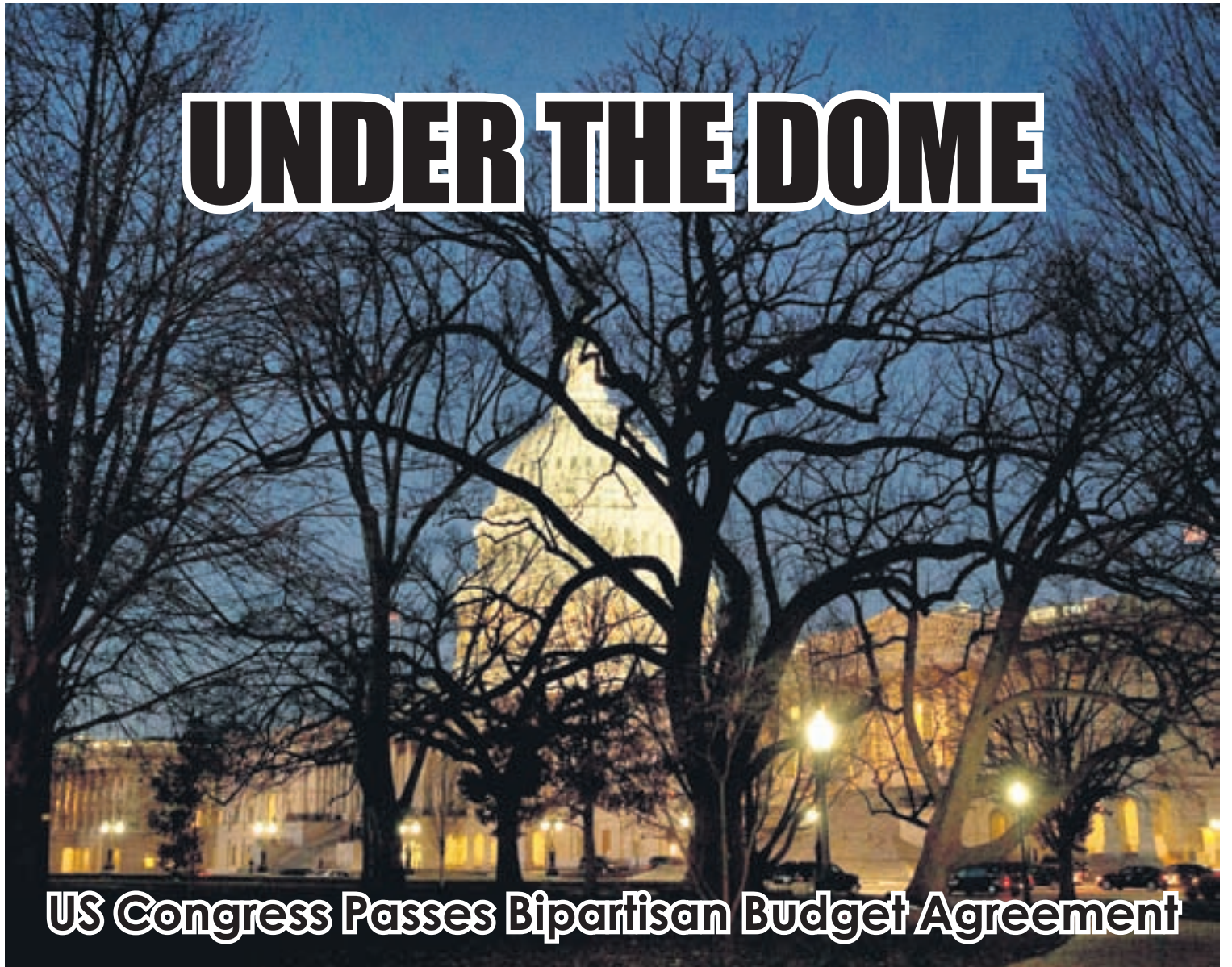
(AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Yet the Fed also made clear it's hardly withdrawing its support for an economy that remains below full health. Chairman Ben Bernanke stressed that the Fed would still work to keep borrowing rates low to try to spur spending and growth and increase very low inflation.

At his final news conference as chairman before he leaves in January, Bernanke managed a delicate balance: He announced a long-awaited and long-feared pullback in the Fed's stimulus.

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UNDER THE DOME



US Congress Passes Bipartisan Budget Agreement

The U.S. Capitol before sunrise in Washington. Congress has sent President Barack Obama a modest, bipartisan budget pact designed to avert another U.S. government shutdown and ease the harshest effects of automatic budget cuts.

(Doug Mills/The New York Times)

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress has sent President Barack Obama a modest, bipartisan budget pact designed to avert another U.S. government shutdown and ease the harshest effects of automatic budget cuts. Obama's signature was assured on the measure, which lawmakers in both parties and at opposite ends of the Capitol said they hoped would curb budget brinkmanship and prevent more shutdowns in the near future.

The final vote on the measure was 64-36 in the Senate. The House approved the bill last week.

The product of intensive year-end talks, the measure met the short-term political needs of Republicans, Democrats and the White House.

As a result, there was no suspense about the outcome of the vote in the Senate — only about fall-out in the 2014 elections and, more immediately, its impact on future con-

gressional disputes over spending and the nation's debt limit. The measure will restore \$45 billion, half the amount scheduled to be automatically cut from the 2014 operating budgets of the Pentagon and some domestic agencies, lifting them above \$1 trillion. An additional \$18 billion for 2015 would provide enough relief to essentially freeze spending at those levels for the year.

The budget deal marks a modest accomplishment

for the divided and often dysfunctional Congress. It comes at the end of a chaotic year punctuated by a 16-day partial government shutdown, spurred by Republicans in a futile attempt to curb implementation of Obama's health care reform law, brinkmanship over raising the federal debt limit and congressional gridlock on issues ranging from immigration to gun control.

Continued on Page 3

Weather to help crews battling Big Sur blaze

HAVEN DALEY
Associated Press

BIG SUR, California (AP) — Firefighters were making progress Wednesday battling an unusual late fall wildfire that has destroyed

more than a dozen homes and forced about 100 people to flee the scenic Big Sur region overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Calm winds helped crews as they closed in on the fire

in Los Padres National Forest near state Highway 1. The blaze had consumed 769 acres (311 hectares) as the 20 percent containment figure officials gave earlier Wednesday was ex-

pected to climb. Full containment is anticipated by late Friday.

"We're cautiously optimistic that we're going to get this nailed down by then," Los Padres National Forest spokesman Andrew Madsen said. "We have temperatures going down as a cold front has come in and cooled things down dramatically."

The blaze has destroyed 22 buildings, about 13 of those structures were homes, he added.

Two firefighters have received minor injuries, Madsen said.

Big Sur — miles of rugged coast, cliffs and wilderness — is a popular tourist destination about 150 miles (240 kilometers) south of San Francisco with high-end resorts and beautiful views of the Pacific Ocean.

The fire was burning a little more than a mile (1.6 kilometer) from Ventana Inn and Spa, a favorite spot among celebrities where former Facebook president and Napster co-founder Sean Parker got married in June. □

Suit: Fire woes known before Carnival sailed

CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN
Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — Carnival Cruise Lines knew about the risk of leaks from engine fuel hoses and recommended taking precautions on the ill-fated Carnival Triumph that later caught on fire at sea, according to court documents.

A compliance notice report sent to the Triumph one month before it departed Galveston, Texas, on Feb. 7 for what was planned as a four-day cruise recommended spray shields be installed on engines' flexible fuel hoses, according to the documents filed Tuesday by Carnival Cruise Lines in federal court in Miami.

A leak from a hose on engine No. 6 led to a fire early on Feb. 10 as the ship returned from a stop in Cozumel, Mexico. No one was injured, but the fire disabled the ship. More than 4,000 people aboard endured a nightmarish tow to Mobile, Alabama, that the plaintiffs' attorney called a "floating hell."

The documents, first reported by CNN, are part of a lawsuit that was filed in February against Carnival Cruise Lines and its parent Carnival Corporation on behalf of dozens of the Triumph's passengers.

Frank Spagnoletti, a Houston attorney who represents some of the passengers, said Tuesday that Carnival was negligent in maintaining the ship and allowed it to sail knowing there was a fire risk.

In a response filed Tuesday in Miami, Carnival said the ship's engines passed inspection before departure and its own recommendation to install spray shields on flexible fuel lines was beyond any required safety measures.

Carnival issued a statement calling the lawsuit frivolous and noting that the U.S. Coast Guard inspected and cleared the ship before its departure. □



Firefighters take a break while lighting a backfire along Highway 1 between Pfeiffer Ridge Road and the Big Sur Station in Big Sur, Calif. on Wednesday Dec. 18, 2013. Calm winds helped crews as they closed in on fire in Los Padres National Forest near state Highway 1. The blaze had consumed 769 acres, or a little over a square mile, as the 20 percent containment figure officials gave earlier Wednesday was expected to climb.

(AP Photo/ Monterey County Herald, David Royal)

India diplomat in US transferred to UN mission

CARA ANNA
NIRMALA GEORGE
Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The Indian diplomat who was strip-searched after her arrest in New York City on visa charges has been transferred to India's mission to the United Nations, her lawyer and a former colleague said Wednesday.

It is unclear how such a move might affect Devyani Khobragade's immunity from prosecution. A U.N. spokesman, however, said the world body had not received the necessary transfer request for her as of Wednesday evening.

Secretary of State John Kerry called a top Indian official to express his regret over the incident, which has outraged India and put a chill in the countries' relations. India has revoked privileges for U.S. diplomats in protest.

Khobragade, who was In-

dia's deputy consul general in New York, was arrested last week outside of her daughter's Manhattan school on charges that she lied on a visa application about how much she paid her housekeeper, an Indian national. Prosecutors say the maid received less than \$3 per hour for her work.

Khobragade has pleaded not guilty. If convicted, she faces a maximum sentence of 10 years for visa fraud and five years for making a false declaration. Khobragade says she has full diplomatic immunity. The State Department disputes that, saying hers is more limited to acts performed in the exercise of consular functions.

Her work status late Wednesday was not clear. Venkatasamy Perumal, consul for press and information at the Indian consulate in New York, said Khobragade was trans-

ferred Tuesday to India's U.N. mission, but he declined to comment further. Requests for comment to the U.N. mission's first secretary were not immediately returned.

State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf told reporters that when such a transfer request is made to the United Nations, the U.N. Secretariat would inform the State Department. It then would have to be reviewed by appropriate authorities in both places.

"It's not an automatic thing by any means," Harf said. At the U.N., spokesman Jerome Bernard said, "as of now, the Secretariat has not received any letter." Khobragade's lawyer, Daniel Arshack, said he didn't know what she would be doing at the U.N. mission, but "I fully expect her to stay in the U.S."

Khobragade has said U.S.

authorities subjected her to a strip search, cavity search and DNA swabbing following her arrest.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described her treatment as "deplorable." In India, the fear of public humiliation resonates strongly, and heavy-handed treatment by the police is normally reserved for the poor. For an educated, middle-class woman to face public arrest and a strip search is almost unimaginable, except in the most brutal crimes.

Harf, the State Department spokeswoman, said Kerry called India's National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, who has slammed the diplomat's treatment as "despicable and barbaric."

In an email published in India media on Wednesday, Khobragade said she was treated like a common criminal. □

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US Congress Passes Bipartisan Budget Agreement

Continued from Front

All that has taken a toll on the approval ratings of both Republicans and Democrats — and Obama himself — creating anxiety across the political spectrum over next year's elections when control of Congress will be at stake.

The bill advanced Tuesday with the help of 12 Republicans, although several promised to oppose the measure in Wednesday's final vote because it fails to take on the nation's most pressing fiscal challenges. It would barely dent deficits that are predicted to lessen in the short term but grow larger by the end of the decade and into the next. Democrats supported the measure, even though many were unhappy that the measure lacked an extension of long-term unemployment benefits that are due to expire for nearly 1.3 million Americans on Dec. 28. One provision, cutting the inflation increases of pensions for military retirees under the age of 62, was proving to be especially unpopular among members of both parties. Members of the military are eligible to retire after 20 years at half pay.

"We had to look at how we could find compromises,"

said Senate Budget Committee Chairman Patty Murray, a Democrat who negotiated the bill with House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, a Republican. "There's things in this I like and there's things I don't like." The deal is a step toward restoring the trust of Americans who feel their government isn't working, and also toward restoring lawmakers' faith in each other, Murray told CNN on Wednesday.

Top Democrats said they would revisit the change in military pensions, which raises \$6 billion over 10 years, before it takes effect in two years.

In a document defending the cut, Ryan's staff called pensions to middle-aged military retirees "an exceptionally generous benefit, often providing 40 years of pension payment in return for 20 years of service" and noted that "most begin a second career after leaving the military."

The budget pact sets the stage in January for the pragmatic-minded House and Senate Appropriations committees to draft a trillion-dollar-plus omnibus spending bill combining the 12 annual appropriations bills for the budget year that began Oct. 1. It would provide \$1.012 tril-

lion for the fiscal 2014 year already underway, a \$45 billion increase over what would be required under the penalty imposed by a 2011 budget deal.

Agency budgets totaled \$986 billion in 2013 after automatic cuts, which were

ment spending. But that grand bargain was never reached and the cuts caused numerous furloughs, harmed military readiness and slashed grants to local school districts, health researchers and providers of preschool

about 4 percent. But those levels remain well below what was envisioned in the 2011 budget pact.

The cuts would be replaced with money from things such as higher airline security fees, a requirement that new federal



Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) sanitizes his hands after a vote on the fiscal budget with Sens. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), center, and Ben Cardin (D-Md.) in Washington, Dec. 18, 2013. The Senate voted 64-36 on Wednesday to give final approval to a two-year tax and spending bill that rolls back automatic spending cuts and may end the budget brinkmanship that has dominated Congress for three years. (Stephen Crowley/The New York Times)

imposed after Democrats and Republicans failed to reach a budget agreement. The cuts, called sequestration, had been intended to be so onerous that they would force Washington to reach a lasting deal on govern-

care to low-income children. Due to the design of the automatic cuts, even with the boost the Pentagon still would see its non-war 2014 budget essentially frozen at 2013 levels, while domestic agencies would see an increase of

workers pay more toward their pensions, the 1-percentage-point cut in the pensions of working-age military retirees and premium increases on companies whose pension plans are insured by the federal government. □

Officials: Baucus to be named ambassador to China

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama intends to nominate Sen. Max Baucus as ambassador to China, Democratic officials said Wednesday, turning to a lawmaker well-versed in trade issues to fill one of the nation's most sensitive diplomatic posts. If confirmed by the Senate, Baucus would replace Ambassador Gary Locke, who announced last month he was stepping down.

control of Congress. Under state law, Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock has the authority to name a Senate successor to serve until the election, and speculation immediately turned to a fellow Democrat, Lt. Gov. John Walsh. There was no immediate comment from the White House on the disclosure, which was made by officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because

declined to confirm the move but said, "Max has given his life to public service and when asked to serve he takes that request very seriously." Obama is in search of a new top diplomat in Beijing as he executes a so-called Asia pivot in U.S. foreign policy to more directly counter China after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The relationship between the two nations has



Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) walks to a meeting on Capitol Hill in Washington. President Barack Obama plans to nominate Baucus as his next ambassador to China, according to three officials familiar with the pending announcement on Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013.

(Doug Mills/The New York Times)

The Montanan's departure from the Senate would have an instant impact on one of Congress' most powerful committees and on the 2014 election for

they were not authorized to discuss the nomination publicly before a formal announcement. Kathy Weber, a spokeswoman in Baucus' office,

grown more troubled in recent weeks, with Chinese authorities unilaterally declaring an air defense zone over disputed islands in the East China Sea. □

AP-GfK poll: Obama rates better on foreign policy

TOM RAUM

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama's approval ratings for handling foreign policy issues generally top his ratings for most domestic issues, including the economy and health care, according to a new Associated Press-GfK poll. But the poll also suggests a majority of Americans want the president to pull troops out of Afghanistan faster than he's doing, and many are skeptical about a tentative nuclear deal with Iran. The poll found that 57 percent now say that going to war in Afghanistan

after the 2001 terrorist attacks was probably the "wrong thing to do." And 53 percent say the pace of the planned withdrawal is too slow, 34 percent said the pace was just about right and 10 percent said it was too fast. All combat troops are scheduled to leave by the end of 2014. Meanwhile, six in 10 Americans approve of the preliminary deal between Iran and six global powers to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. But that support is soft and many doubt the preliminary deal will lead to concrete results. Even though he garners

more disapproval than approval on the handling of Afghanistan and Iran, Obama generally gets better ratings on foreign policy than on domestic issues. Nearly half (49 percent) approve of his handling of U.S. relations with other countries while 50 percent disapprove. In contrast, just 40 percent approve of his handling of the economy, while 59 percent disapprove. And on health care, the approval rating stands at 39 percent, with 61 percent disapproving. His overall job approval is at 42 percent, with 58 percent disapproving. □

Obama panel recommends tough limits on NSA spying

DAVID E. SANGER

CHARLIE SAVAGE

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WASHINGTON — A panel of presidential advisers who reviewed the National Security Agency's surveillance practices urged President Barack Obama on Wednesday to end the government's systematic collection of logs of all Americans' phone calls, and to keep those in private hands, "for queries and data mining" only by court order.

In a more than 300-page report made public by the White House, the group of five intelligence and legal experts also strongly recommended that any operation to spy on foreign leaders would have to pass a rigorous test that weighs the potential economic or diplomatic costs if the operation becomes public. The decision to monitor those communications, it said, should be made by the president and his advisers, not the intelligence agencies. It also recommends new limits on surveillance of ordinary non-Americans. It argues for applying to foreign targets of intelligence the protections accorded to Americans under the Privacy Act of 1974, meaning the government could release very little information about them.

The panel also declared that the NSA should cease efforts to undermine work to create secure encryption standards to protect confidential communications and data stored on remote "cloud" servers, and make clear that "it will not in any way subvert, undermine, weaken or make vulnerable generally available commercial encryption."

It also said the United States should get out of the business of secretly collecting flaws in common computer programs and using them for mounting cyberattacks, because the technique undermines confidence in U.S. products. That technique, using what are called "zero day" flaws that have never been discovered before, were critical to the cyberattacks that the United States and Israel launched on Iran in an effort to slow its nuclear program.

Taken together, the recommendations would remove from the NSA's hands the authority to conduct many of its operations without review by the president, Congress or the courts. But by themselves, they would terminate few programs.

The report was commissioned by Obama after the revelations made by Edward J. Snowden, the former NSA contractor who cleaned the agency out of many of its secret documents. Taken together with a federal court decision this week that found some of the bulk collection of telephone data "almost Orwellian," and objections from Silicon Valley, the report adds to pressure on Obama to rein in the NSA for the first time since its authorities began a rapid expansion after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"What we're saying is just because we can doesn't mean we should," said Richard Clarke, one of the advisers. Forty-six recommendations were included in the report that was delivered to the White House over the weekend. The Obama administration released the document to the public after a private briefing by the five-member panel.

It is not clear how many of the recommendations will ultimately become a reality. Some would require action by Obama alone, while others would require legislation from Congress. Obama has already rejected one of the recommendations the group made: splitting command of the NSA, which conducts surveillance, from the U.S. Cyber Command, the Pentagon's cyberwarfare unit, to avoid concentrating too much power in the hands of a single individual. □



Improving US economy leads Fed to ease stimulus

Continued from Front

Yet he did so while convincing investors that the Fed would continue to bolster the economy indefinitely. Wall Street roared its approval.

The Fed said in a statement after its policy meeting ended Wednesday that it will trim its \$85 billion a month in bond purchases by \$10 billion starting in January. Bernanke said the Fed expects to make "similar moderate" cuts in its purchases if economic gains continue.

At the same time, the Fed strengthened its commitment to record-low short-term rates. It said for the first time that it plans to hold its key short-term rate near zero "well past" the time when unemployment falls below 6.5 percent. Unemployment is now 7 percent. The Fed's bond purchases have been intended to drive down long-term borrowing rates by increasing demand for the bonds. The prospect of a lower pace of purchases could mean higher loans rates over time.

Nevertheless, investors seemed elated by the Fed's finding that the economy has steadily strengthened, by its firm

commitment to low short-term rates and by the only slight amount by which it's paring its bond purchases. The Dow Jones industrial average soared nearly 300 points. Bond prices

talking about," Scott Anderson, chief economist of Bank of the West. "It really seems like that's going to come together in 2014." The Fed's move "eliminates the uncertainty as to

But Perli noted that the Fed will continue to buy bonds every month to keep long-term rates down and remains strongly committed to low short-term rates. By keeping rates historically

of low-yielding bonds and into stocks, thereby driving up stock prices. Still, the gains have been unevenly distributed: About 80 percent of stock market wealth is held by the richest 10 percent of Americans.

In updated economic forecasts issued Wednesday, the Fed predicted that unemployment would fall a bit further over the next two years than it thought in September. And it expects inflation to remain below the Fed's target level.

The Fed expects the unemployment rate to dip as low as 6.3 percent next year and 5.8 percent in 2015. Unemployment has fallen faster this year than policymakers had predicted.

And Fed policymakers predict that their preferred inflation index won't reach its target of 2 percent until the end of 2015 at the earliest. For the 12 months ending in October, the inflation index is up just 0.7 percent. The Fed worries about very low inflation because it can lead people and businesses to delay purchases. Extremely low inflation also makes it costlier to repay loans. In its statement, the Fed says it will reduce its purchases of mortgage-bonds and Treasury bonds each by \$5 billion. □



A television screen at a trading post on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange show the decision of the Federal Reserve, Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013. The Federal Reserve has decided to reduce its stimulus for the U.S. economy because the job market has shown steady improvement. The Fed will trim its \$85 billion a month in bond purchases by \$10 billion starting in January.

(AP Photo/Richard Drew)

fluctuated, but by late afternoon the yield on the 10-year Treasury note had barely moved. It inched up to 2.89 percent from 2.88 percent.

"We're really at a point where we're getting to the self sustaining recovery that the Fed has been

whether or when the Fed will taper and will give markets the opportunity to focus on what really matters, which is the economic outlook," said Roberto Perli, a former Fed economist who is now head of monetary policy research at Cornerstone Macro.

low, the Fed "will continue to remain very supportive of risky assets" such as stocks, Perli said.

The stock market has enjoyed a spectacular 2013, fueled in part by the Fed's low-rate policies. Those rates have led many investors to shift money out

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Auction approved for railroad in Quebec derailment

DAVID SHARP
Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — As the first trains rolled into a Quebec town devastated by a derailment and fire that killed 47 people, a U.S. federal bankruptcy judge approved bidding procedures Wednesday for the auction of the Maine-based railroad that owned the train. The action in a courtroom in Bangor came on the same day the first Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railways trains rolled into Lac Megantic, Quebec, since the July 6 disaster. Trustee Robert Keach said the goal is to sell the railroad's operations in Maine and Canada in a way that allows the rail service to continue. "We think we'll have a robust auction process that'll produce a buyer or buyers who'll operate the railroad in the public interest," he said.

Any proceeds from the company's sale would be used to repay creditors and victims, supplementing \$25 million in insur-

ance payouts available for wrongful death, personal injury, property damage, fire suppression and environmental impact. Critics say the cleanup alone will exceed \$25 million.

There's already a "stalking horse" bid of \$14.25 million from Railroad Acquisition Holdings LLC, which is affiliated with Fortress Investment Group, a publicly traded investment company. But there are more than a dozen interested buyers and there could be additional bids at next month's auction.

Keach said all potential bidders have been queried about their operational plans. The goal is to get the best price to recoup losses and to retain the rail line, he said.

In the July derailment, an unmanned Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway train with 72 oil tankers began rolling after it was left unattended by the solo crew member who parked it at the end of his shift.

The train picked up speed and derailed in downtown

Lac-Megantic, causing an explosion and fire that destroyed about 30 buildings in the community 10 miles

happen slowly. No dangerous substances will be transported through the town, she said.

by the bankruptcy judge Wednesday puts the U.S. case on the same timetable as a companion case



In this July 2013 photo, workers comb through debris after an unmanned train with 72 railway cars carrying crude oil derailed Saturday causing explosions in Lac-Megantic, Quebec. A bankruptcy hearing Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013 in Bangor, Maine, aims to establish bidding procedures for the Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway, and to set a deadline for people to file claims against the railroad, whose train derailed killing 47 people. (AP Photo/Paul Chiasson)

north of the Maine border. Before Wednesday, there had been only a couple of test trains running into town, and Mayor Colette Roy-Laroche said the restoration of rail service will

Roy-Laroche told reporters in Canada earlier this week that psychological aid will be available for people traumatized by the return of the trains.

The timetable approved

in Canada that covers the railroad's assets there. It calls for competing bids for the company's assets to be submitted by Jan. 17 with the auction beginning Jan. 21. □

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New Jersey sues Credit Suisse over mortgage securities

TRENTON, New Jersey (AP) — The state of New Jersey is accusing Credit Suisse Securities and two affiliates of misrepresenting the risks involved in the sale of more than \$10 billion in residential mortgage-backed securities.

In a lawsuit filed Wednesday, the state said Credit Suisse did not disclose to investors that underwriting guidelines had been abandoned in the sales. The suit, which is similar to one filed by New York last year, says investors were also not told that numerous loan originators had poor track records and that

some had even been suspended from doing business with Credit Suisse.

The state alleges that one-fourth of the loans the firm examined were underwater, or were for more than the homes were worth. They were so risky that Credit Suisse's own traders would not hold them even as the company promoted them to outside investors. "The kind of conduct described in this lawsuit is the kind of conduct that helped put the nation in financial crisis, with loan originators and investment banking firms abandoning prudent lending guide-

lines in order to generate quick profits," Acting Attorney General John Hoffman said in a statement. "Ultimately, it was consumers who suffered the harm caused by these reckless lending practices, and by the misrepresentations used to make these doomed investments seem attractive."

Credit Suisse spokesman Drew Benson says the complaint is without merit. "It recycles baseless claims and uses inaccurate and exaggerated figures," he said in a statement. "We look forward to presenting our defense in court." □

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US Financial Front:

Holiday shopping season: a disappointment so far

ANNE D'INNOCENZIO

AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Sparse crowds at malls and “50 percent off” signs at The Gap, AnnTaylor and other stores give a clue as to how the U.S. holiday season is going.

This is shaping up to be the most discount-driven holiday season since the country was in a deep recession. It's also one of the most disappointing for stores. Sales are up 2 percent to \$176.7 billion from the start of the season on Nov. 1 through Sunday, according to data obtained by The Associated Press from store data tracker ShopperTrak.

That's a slower pace than expected given that there are just days left in the season: ShopperTrak is forecasting that sales will rise 2.4 percent to \$265 billion for the two-month stretch that's typically the busiest shopping period of the year. The modest growth comes as the amount of discounts that stores are offering this season is up 13 percent from last year — the highest level since 2008 when the country was in a recession, according to financial services firm BMO Capital Markets.

“The holiday season has been marginal to just OK,” said Joel Bines, managing director and co-head of the retail practice at Alix-Partners. “Retailers are do-

ing anything they can to get rid of merchandise.”

The data underscores how aggressive discounting has been both a blessing and a curse for retailers. Since the recession, the only way to get Americans into stores has been to flash huge yellow discount signs in front of their faces.

But all that discounting has had some unintended consequences. Retailers have learned as shoppers become immune to the deals, they have to continue to offer bigger discounts to get them in to stores.

That erodes sales since shoppers are spending less. It also eats away at stores' profit margins. Still, analysts say retailers have created a cycle of constant discounting that they'll have to continue in order to attract U.S. shoppers, many of who are still dealing with stagnant wages and rising costs for things like health care.

The sales so far have not attracted as many shoppers as retailers had hoped. ShopperTrak, a Chicago-based firm that tracks data at 40,000 stores across the country, said the number of shoppers from Nov. 1 through Sunday dropped 16.5 percent compared with the same period a year ago.

Still, ShopperTrak is sticking to its growth forecast for the season. Bill Martin, ShopperTrak's co-found-



Sale signs are displayed at a Kmart, in New York. Sales are up 2 percent through Sunday, Dec. 15, 2013, according to data obtained by The Associated Press from store data tracker ShopperTrak, on Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013, which declined to give dollar figures. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

er, reasons that six of the holiday season's top 10 spending days still are left. And he estimates that the week before Christmas ac-

counts for 10 percent to 15 percent of overall holiday business. “The good news is that there are still some big days left,” Martin said.

The National Retail Federation, the largest U.S. retail group, also is standing by its forecast that sales in stores and online combined will be up 3.9 percent to \$602.1 billion. The average holiday shopper had completed only 49.9 percent of their buying as of Dec. 9, according to a survey of about 6,300 by trade group, slightly less than the 56.4 percent that had completed their shopping a year ago by that time. But much of that increase could come from online shopping. Even though it only accounts for about 11 percent of spending in the four months that include the holiday shopping season, it's been a bright spot. □

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Ukraine's Prime Minister hails deal with Russia

Andrew E. Kramer

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KIEV, Ukraine - Ukrainian officials on Wednesday praised a financial aid package from Russia as the country's only hope to prevent economic collapse, although it was signed in defiance of a large and sustained protest in the capital.

"Today, I can firmly announce that the crisis moment has passed," the country's prime minister, Mykola Azarov, said in comments reported by the Ukrainian news media. "We have a new and firm perspective of confidence. We will maintain social and financial stability. Now, nothing threatens the financial and economic stability of Ukraine."

On Tuesday, President Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine and President Vladimir Putin of Russia said that Russia would come to the rescue of its financially troubled neighbor, providing \$15 billion in loans and a steep discount on natural gas prices. The announcement seemed to have a deflating effect on the protesters, a tired and haggard group after spending more than three weeks encamped on Independence Square. A church choir sang. Protest leaders asked for patience as they scrambled to devise a new strategy. The protests were ignited by the government's last-minute failure to sign political and free trade accords

with Europe, which had been seen as an alternative to the Russian deal. Their demands, though, had expanded to seeking

to fuse the demonstrations, even though the main demand, for European integration, went unmet. "People came to the

ment of Azarov, signaling the shift in emphasis to domestic political issues.

The lack of a major reaction in the streets left Putin,

ny's chancellor, Angela Merkel, appeared to be falling back on a less ambitious goal for the country, hinting at a solution that



A woman wrapped in a Ukrainian flag listens to a speech delivered on a stage set up at Independence Square in Kiev, Ukraine, Dec. 17, 2013. Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia would provide \$15 billion in loans and a sharp discount on natural gas prices to Ukraine when he met on Tuesday in Moscow with Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich.

(Sergey Ponomarev/The New York Times)

punishment for the police, accused of violently attacking demonstrators, and the resignation of Azarov. The government is now prepared to negotiate with the protesters over those demands, Viktor Pinchuk, one of Ukraine's most powerful businessmen, said in an interview. Concessions now from Yanukovich on these domestic political issues could de-

streets today for values and against violence," he said. "Now, they are not there for the association agreement," the name of the wide-ranging trade deal with the European Union that Yanukovich rejected.

On Wednesday, opposition leaders said they had moved closer to obtaining enough votes in Parliament to dismiss the govern-

for the moment, seeming to have the upper hand over Europe and the United States in the contest for Ukraine, a former Soviet republic of 46 million that is culturally, economically and militarily intertwined with Russia. It is by far the most populous and influential country in the region that has remained outside the European orbit.

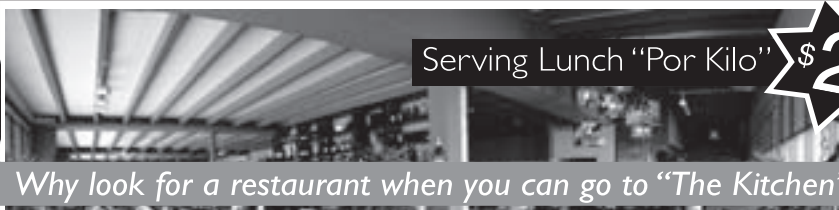
On Wednesday, Germa-

would integrate Ukraine's economy with the European Union while not ruling out customs-free trade with Russia, as had been the stipulated in the failed association agreement.

In her first address to lawmakers since being sworn in for a third term as chancellor, Merkel said Wednesday that the European Union's offer to Ukraine "remains on the table." □

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Palestinians say ready to extend talks with Israel

KARIN LAUB

Associated Press

BEIT JALLA, West Bank (AP)

— The Palestinians are ready to extend current peace talks with Israel beyond an April deadline if a detailed framework agreement is in place by then, the chief Palestinian negotiator said Wednesday. The comments by Saeb Erekat marked the first time Palestinian negotiators endorsed the U.S. idea of seeking a preliminary rather than a final deal by the end of a nine-month period of negotiations to which both sides agreed at the outset.

Erekat said it is possible to reach such a framework agreement by the end of April, despite wide gaps between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a hardliner who holds tougher positions than his predecessors. He suggested that much ground has already been covered in previous negotiations on a final peace deal, dating back to 2000. "Actually, it's about decisions," he told reporters in the town of Beit Jalla adja-

cent to biblical Bethlehem. "If Netanyahu decides it's going to happen, it's going to happen."

Netanyahu's office had no immediate comment.

The Palestinians want a state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, territories Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war, but are ready for minor land swaps to enable Israel to keep some of the larger of dozens of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Unlike his predecessor, Netanyahu has refused to accept the pre-1967 lines as a starting point for border talks and rejects a partition of Jerusalem into an Israeli and a Palestinian capital. Under U.S.-pressure, Israel and the Palestinians resumed negotiations last summer, agreeing to talk for nine months with the goal of a permanent peace agreement. With little progress so far, the Americans are now setting their sights on a preliminary deal.

Erekat said that based on the July 29 start of negotiations, they are to end on April 29. "We are not talking about a peace treaty

on the 29th of April. We are talking about a framework agreement," he said.

He described a framework

Asked by The Associated Press if the Palestinians would continue the talks, provided a framework

age of swaps, the security arrangements, the Jerusalem status, refugees and then that is the skeleton."

Previously the Palestinians indicated that after April, they would resume a campaign of seeking wider recognition at the U.N. and other international bodies in the absence of a peace deal. Israel opposes such efforts, saying they are a way to sidestep negotiations.

Still, reaching a framework deal on all core issues is a longshot. Israel and the Palestinians have vast differences over future borders, the status of Palestinian refugees who seek to return to lost properties in what is now Israel and the conflicting claims to Jerusalem and its sensitive holy sites. □



Israeli soldiers rest under a tree after a night training in Tel Hadid, located between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Israel, Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

deal as more detailed than a declaration of principles and said it would have to be turned into a full peace treaty in six to 12 months.

deal is in place by April, Erekat said: "Absolutely, if we reach a framework agreement that specifies the borders, the percent-

Venezuela's president calls for gasoline price increase

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP)

— The price of the world's cheapest gasoline will start to nudge higher if Venezuela's president has his way. President Nicolas Maduro says he favors raising gas prices that have been stuck at around 5 cents a gallon for nearly two decades.

Maduro says an eventual price hike will come only at an "opportune time," after a government-led debate explaining to Venezuelans how much money is spent

subsidizing motorists and assuring such an increase won't add to inflation.

Successive Venezuelan leaders have balked at raising gas prices for fear of repeating the policy mistake that triggered days of deadly rioting in 1989. The government says subsidies consume upward of \$12.5 billion a year and contribute to pollution as Venezuelans buck a global trend toward more fuel efficient, cleaner fuel-burning vehicles. □

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Egypt: Morsi to face new trial on terror charges

MAGGIE MICHAEL
SARAH EL DEEB
Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Egyptian prosecutors on Wednesday announced a new trial of ousted President Mohammed Morsi and the top leaders of his Muslim Brotherhood, accusing them of conspiring with Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran's Revolutionary Guard and militant groups to carry out a wave of terrorism to destabilize the country.

The charges, which carry a potential death penalty, are the most sweeping and heaviest accusations yet in a series of trials against the Brotherhood. The new trial of Morsi, the three top Brotherhood leaders and 32 other defendants appeared aimed at decisively crippling the top echelons of the group that dominated Egypt's political scene during Morsi's one-year presidency.

The timing appeared aimed at further tarnishing the Brotherhood among the public ahead of a key January referendum on a new constitution, a substantial rewrite of the charter largely drafted by Islamists under Morsi. The new military-backed government is seeking a strong "yes" vote for the constitution to show the legitimacy of the political transition process put in place after the military removed Morsi on July 3. Brotherhood supporters oppose the new document and have vowed protests against it.

Since the coup, prompted by massive protests calling for Morsi's removal, Egypt has been in continual unrest. Morsi supporters have

been holding near daily protests demanding his reinstatement, met by a fierce security crackdown that has killed hundreds of people and arrested thousands of Brotherhood members. Meanwhile, a wave of retaliatory attacks by suspected Islamic militants have targeted Christians and security forces, and the Sinai Peninsula has been the center of a mounting militant insurgency. Throughout, the new government has depicted the Brotherhood as a violent movement that

breaks during the 2011 uprising that forced autocrat Hosni Mubarak out of power and of organizing the Sinai militant backlash.

"The biggest case of conspiracy in Egypt's history goes to the criminal court," proclaimed the title of the prosecution announcement.

Mohammed el-Damati, a defense lawyer for the Brotherhood, denounced the new trial — and those already started — as "political," aiming to give a legal veneer to the crackdown. Rights lawyers, including



In this file photo, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi holds a joint news conference in Cairo, Egypt. Egypt state media is reporting that the top prosecutor has referred Morsi to trial for conspiring with foreign groups with the intention of carrying out terrorist operations in the country. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

threatened the nation and forced the military to remove it power. Previous, ongoing trials of Morsi and other Brotherhood leaders have focused on accusations the group is implicated in violence.

But the new charges take that claim to a new level, accusing the group of being enmeshed with terrorists since 2005 in deals aimed at attaining and holding onto power, of plotting the collapse of police and prison

some who believe Brotherhood members should be prosecuted for violence, have expressed similar worries that the wave of trials against them are mere political vengeance.

"The biggest victim now is justice and the truth," said Bahy Eddin Hassan, head of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, calling the new case part of the "ongoing contest" between the Brotherhood and the new government. □

Russia amnesty bill could free popular defendants

ANDREW ROTH
© 2013 New York Times

MOSCOW - An amnesty bill that seemed to promise freedom for defendants in some of Russia's most politically charged criminal cases passed the lower house of Parliament on Wednesday. The two jailed members of the punk protest group Pussy Riot and the 30 Greenpeace demonstrators arrested at an Arctic offshore oil rig appeared to be among those likely to receive amnesty. The bill was initiated by President Vladimir Putin and passed swiftly through the state Duma. The full text of the bill was not made public before the voting; it was scheduled to be printed in state outlets Thursday. The bill is expected to grant amnesty to as many as 25,000 prisoners, including those charged with hooliganism, which would appear to include Pussy Riot and the Greenpeace demonstrators.

The amnesty is seen as a way for Putin to move those two prosecutions, which have attracted wide criticism abroad, out of the spotlight before the Winter Olympics begin in Sochi in February. There has been speculation that some world leaders were considering staying away from the games because of concerns over Russia's record on human rights. Putin said this month in a meeting with Russia's human rights ombudsman and a presidential adviser on human rights that the amnesty bill "should have a conciliatory effect and should underscore our country's humane approach," although he warned that it would not apply to repeat offenders. The original bill, submitted by Putin last week, sought to release pregnant women or women with young children, elderly convicts, victims of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, war veterans and others convicted of minor crimes. Amendments to the bill widened its scope to include defendants accused or convicted of committing hooliganism or participating in mass protests. That provision would cover some people who were arrested after an anti-Putin rally in Moscow in May that descended into pitched battles between police officers and protesters. But most of those arrested were charged with inciting mass rioting or attacking police officers and would not receive amnesty under the bill. A lawyer for the two Pussy Riot members, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, said she expected the women to be released quickly. They have already served most of their two-year sentences for reciting a "punk prayer" against Putin in Moscow's largest cathedral in 2012. "They will get out tomorrow or the day after," said Irina Khrunova, the lawyer. "If it's published, they have the right to leave." Leaders of Greenpeace said they were cautiously optimistic that prosecutors would drop the charges against the group's members, who are free on bail awaiting trial in a St. Petersburg court. □

CDC issues travel health advisory for St. Martin

DAVID McFADDEN

Associated Press

KINGSTON, Jamaica (AP)

— U.S. health authorities have issued a travel advisory for the French Caribbean dependency of St. Martin because of a mosquito-borne viral disease that is apparently being spread locally at the start of the winter tourist season. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Wednesday it is closely following reports of the chikungunya virus among residents of the French side of a tiny island in the northeast Caribbean marketed as the "The Friendly Island." It's the first time the disease typically found in Africa and Asia has been reported in the Western Hemisphere among people who have not traveled recently, suggesting that the virus is now being carried by infected island mosquitoes.

"Microbes know no boundaries, and the appearance of the chikungunya virus in the Western Hemisphere represents another threat to health security," CDC Director Tom Frieden said in a statement.

The World Health Organization has reported 10 confirmed cases in tourism-dependent St. Mar-



Photo shows people walking the downtown streets in St. Martin. (Handout Photo)

tin, which splits the island with the Dutch constituent country of St. Maarten. The disease's further spread to other Caribbean islands, and to surrounding mainland areas, is possible, the center said in its advisory for U.S. residents traveling to the French territory.

The virus can cause fever, joint pains, a rash, headaches and muscle and joint pain that can be debilitating and persist for several weeks in severe cases. Because it's spread by infected mosquitoes, travelers to St. Martin are advised to avoid mosquito

bites by using insect repellent, wearing long sleeves and pants and using air conditioning and window and door screens to keep the bugs out.

There is no vaccine, but the virus is rarely fatal.

Silviane John, director of the St. Martin Tourist Office, said both sides of the island are cooperating closely to reduce mosquito breeding sites and increase public awareness about the importance of dumping out stagnant water. Mosquito fogging trucks are frequently seen on the streets, she said.

"It's a concern for us right now, for sure. We haven't heard of any cancellations from hotels or airlines so it is a wait-and-see game," John said from St. Martin, where many of the visitors are French as well as Amer-

icans or Canadians escaping from the northern cold. St. Martin's government was drafting a letter to airlines letting them know how they are battling the spread of the virus, John said. □

5 dead in shootout in Mexico resort

HERMOSILLO, Mexico (AP)

— Five men were killed in a gunbattle with Mexican security forces early Wednesday near a luxury hotel in the popular Gulf of California resort of Puerto Penasco, also known as Rocky Point, authorities said.

The resort across the border from Arizona is popular with U.S. tourists and the community hosts a large expatriate community. Shootouts are very rare at Mexican beach resorts, though they have occurred in Acapulco.

On its Twitter account, the U.S. Consulate in Nogales, Sonora, advised U.S. citizens in Puerto Penasco to shelter in place.

Carlos Navarro Sugich, attorney general of the bor-

der state of Sonora, said the shootout involved police and military personnel confronting gunmen. He did not identify the hotel or the gunmen.

Navarro Sugich said two of the men died in the original clash, and two more died when they crashed their vehicle trying to flee authorities during the confrontation. Another man later died of wounds.

No tourists were killed, authorities said. "There was fear among the residents, because this is a very peaceful community, and hearing gunfire really upsets the tranquility of any community, especially one that is not accustomed to this kind of thing," Navarro Sugich told Milenio televi-

sion later in the day.

He said the resort was calm and under control.

A resident reached by telephone said she heard helicopters flying over her home in the early morning hours. Despite its reputation as a calm beach resort that has been spared the violence that has hit other parts of northern Mexico, there have been indications of trouble in Puerto Penasco in the past. In 2011, soldiers seized five metric tons of marijuana in and around the city, and the city's police chief was shot and wounded in 2010. The wider region has been the scene of turf battles between the Sinaloa drug cartel and rival gangs in the past. □

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UK: Unemployment rate prompts rate rise talk

DANICA KIRKA
Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's unemployment rate has fallen to its lowest rate in about four years, official figures showed Wednesday, in a development that's reinforced expectations that the Bank of England will start raising interest rates sooner than previously thought.

The Office for National Sta-

ed. The fall takes the rate nearer to the 7 percent threshold the central bank has said will prompt an assessment of policy. Carney has insisted that the Bank will not act prematurely — or automatically — when the threshold is reached. However, the recent falls in unemployment have prompted economists to predict that the bank will raise interest rates sooner,

ic and Business Research, thinks the unemployment rate will continue to fall to 7.1 percent by the end of 2014, "setting the scene for the Bank of England to increase interest rates in early 2015." The bank's latest forecasts suggest the target may be reached by the third quarter of 2015 rather than the original estimate of 2016. The minutes of the Bank's last policy



Bank of England's Victoria Cleland, right, and Mark Cornelius carry posters showing the design of the new polymer banknotes as they pose for the media after a news conference at the Bank of England in London, Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013. (AP Photo/Dylan Martinez)

tistics said the unemployment rate fell to 7.4 percent for the three months ending in October, down 0.3 percentage points from the previous three-month period. The decline provides further evidence that the recovery of Europe's third-largest economy is gathering pace and comes just a day after Bank Governor Mark Carney said the British economy was performing better than predict-

perhaps as soon as next year. That was evident in the performance of the pound, which was trading 0.5 percent higher at \$1.6353. The bank has kept its main interest rate at the record low of 0.5 percent since early 2009 in the wake of a financial crisis that caused the country's deepest recession since World War II.

Katie Evans, an economist at the Centre for Econom-

meeting showed no sign of any imminent rise. The nine rate-setters on the Monetary Policy Committee voted unanimously to keep interest rates unchanged and to refrain from pumping more money into the economy.

Members of Britain's Conservative-led government said the unemployment figures provided further evidence that its economic strategy is working. □

EU opening finance probe into Spanish aid to soccer

RAF CASERT
Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union announced a probe Wednesday targeting Real Madrid, Barcelona and five other top Spanish soccer clubs that it says may have received possible illegal state aid.

The EU also said it might widen its investigation to include soccer teams' outstanding tax debts to the Spanish government, which total in the hundreds of millions.

EU Competition Commissioner Joaquin Almunia said clubs should use sound financial management rather than live "at the expense of the taxpayer."

Almunia's office is responsible for making sure that businesses across the 28-country EU face a level playing field — including multi-billion, immensely popular soccer industry. The probe is intended to see if teams like Barcelona and Real Madrid have been unfairly relying on state aid to face other clubs in Spain's top flight La Liga league and European teams like Bayern Munich in the UEFA Champions League.

Beyond the top two teams, the probe is also investigating Valencia, Hercules, Elche, Athletic Bilbao and Osasuna.

The Spanish government, which knew the probe was coming, has already said there was nothing illegal about the aid that the clubs received.

"Sometimes probes are opened and closed without any consequences," Spanish Economy Minister Luis de Guindos said Wednesday.

The objections the EU was looking into centered on how Spanish clubs and local authorities handled fiscal issues such as loan guarantees, land swaps or construction funding.

The EU ombudsman's services said a complainant in the case said the state aid totals several billion euros, adding that the Commissioner had been considering the issue for years before announcing Wednesday's opening of proceedings.

More importantly, Almunia also said he might look beyond the specific case raised Wednesday.

"I have also read about the questions on the high debts of the (soccer) football clubs to the economics ministry," Almunia said.

In April, Spain's Sports Council said Spanish soccer clubs owed the government 670 million euros (\$874 million) in taxes.

La Liga is one of the toughest professional soccer leagues in the world and any EU decision could have a deep impact on its future. The probe may take several months and any decision could then be challenged at the EU's highest court in Luxembourg. □



A full dose of holiday cheer for Westin associates



PALM BEACH – One of the most anticipated events of the year at the Westin is the annual Holiday Gala held for all associates and management of the resort. Not only does the resort deck the halls in holiday finery,

the associates are decked out as well—saying so long to uniforms, and impressing with the glitz and glamour of gala dresses and suits. A delectable holiday feast and cocktails was enjoyed by all in the Grand Palm

Beach Ballroom last week, while a live music kept everyone dancing into the wee hours of the morning. The holiday gala comes just in time—right on the cusp of the very busy high season set to start this coming

week. The Westin Resort & Casino, Aruba reports that they are expecting a full house for much of the upcoming high season, and associates are geared up for a successful 2014! □

Three Minutes Before Christmas

By Roland W. Peterson

It is two days before Christmas and Santa Claus is very nervous. He is pacing back and forth. He is making phone calls and is drinking a lot of black coffee. He does not know what to do. Santa...Santa what is wrong? Well it is two days before Christmas and Rudolf the Red Nose Reindeer is still sick. Rudolf has the flu and is coughing all day. He is sneezing and has the fever. Well ...if you thought that his nose was red, you should see it now. It is glowing even more. Santa took Rudolf to the doctor and Rudolf must not leave the stable. Who is going to lead Santa's sleigh? For many years now Rudolf has lead Santa's sleigh. He is the one that is in front of the other reindeers. Rudolf knows all the addresses of the children by heart. In all the years he has never forgotten one child.

But now that he cannot leave the stable, who is going to lead Santa's sleigh? Now we understand why Santa is so upset and worried.

It is two days before Xmas and Santa has no one to lead his sleigh. Two more days and Santa must deliver



the gifts to the children. What is Santa going to do? It is three o'clock in the morning and Santa still cannot sleep. He is thinking and thinking. He does not have a solution. Well now he has decided that he will cancel his trip this year to Aruba, because he cannot find a reindeer who knows all the children on Aruba. Santa does not want to do this, but he has no other choice. Santa decides to call the Governor and tell him that he has cancelled his trip to Aruba because Rudolf the Red Nose reindeer is sick and he has no other reindeer to lead his sleigh. Santa, who has a "hotline" with the Governor calls him around four o'clock in the morning. The Governor who was fast asleep woke

up when the phone rang. Who could it be, calling at this time at night? The Governor was a little upset, but when he heard Santa's voice he was pleasantly surprised.

Santa told the Governor his problem and said that he would have to cancel his trip to Aruba, which means that the children would not receive any gifts this year. Now the Governor is also worried. This cannot happen. But what can he do? Santa told the Governor that when he has a solution to call him back.

O...o now the Governor is also with his hands on his head. What must he do? He cannot sleep anymore. He is thinking, pondering, thinking and thinking. Finally he has an idea. Before

sunrise he called his driver to come to him. The driver was very surprised because never before did the Governor wake him up so early. The Governor told the driver that Santa has called him and what the problem was. When the Governor got into his car he told the driver to take the road to the North coast and that underway he would tell him where he was going. The driver jokingly said then: "Mister Governor, it is not the North coast we have to go to, it looks like you have to go to the North Pole." The Governor who knew what he was going to do just shook his head and with a smile answered: "Don't worry, just do what I told you." Underway the Governor told the driver that they had to go to the cunucu of Shon Waki. When they arrived in front of the house of Shon Waki he was sitting under the kwihi tree drinking coffee. Very surprised Shon Waki kept staring at the big car as it stopped in front of his house, and who gets out, the Governor. Shon Waki took a big sip of his coffee and almost burned his lips. "Mr. Governor, what can I do for you? Did you lose your way?"

"No mister Shon Waki, it is you I am looking for." The Governor then told Shon Waki his problem. Shon Waki told the Governor that he kept goats and not reindeers. The governor told Shon Waki that he had read in children's storybooks about the little goat with one horn, called Meki, who was the hero of all the goats, and that Meki knew all the children's addresses on Aruba. Shon Waki told the Governor that Meki could do many things and...that he knew all the children of Aruba that was the truth, but fly in the sky in front of a sleigh ... oh no that he cannot do. The Governor then said that he would call Santa Claus and tell him about Meki.

That same day the Governor called Santa and told him about Meki. That Meki could do many things and that he knew all the children, but fly in the sky, that he could not do. Santa told the Governor what he had to do. At exact three minutes before Christmas the Governor has to return to Shon Waki and has to tell Meki something. That day Shon Waki told

little Meki what he would have to do. Poor little Meki became very scared and nervous, because flying in the sky over the roofs of the houses, is something he never did before. All the reindeers have big beautiful horns, he only had one little horn. Shon Waki told Meki that everything would be alright and that the Governor would come back at three minutes before Xmas! As promised, at exactly three minutes before Xmas the governor returned to the cunucu of Shon Waki. Poor little Meki was so afraid. His little legs were trembling. His head was hanging down and his little eyes were closed. As promised the Governor went to little Meki and whispered something in his left ear. Right away Meki raised his head and opened his eyes very wide. His little legs stopped trembling. He had a smile on his face. Meki was so excited that he stood up on his two hind legs and pushed his little chest forward. What is it that the Governor told Meki in his ear? It has to be some "Magic words." Suddenly they heard bells ringing in the sky. Ata ... Santa Claus has arrived with his sleigh. The sleigh was filled with gifts. Rudolf was not in front.

When Santa landed, together with Shon Waki they put little Meki in front of the reindeers. Little Meki was very proud. With a big smile on his face he was pushing his chest forward. Santa got back on the sleigh and in a wink of an eye they were in the sky, with Meki, with his one horn, leading the sleigh. Santa waved to the Governor and Shon Waki. Meki winked an eye to them. Meki with his little horn looked very cute. That Christmas night Meki guided Santa to the homes of the all the children of Aruba. And so ... when they woke up Christmas morning all the children had their gifts. It was the first time in the history of Christmas that a little Aruban goat guided Santa's sleigh. And so Meki made sure all the children got their gifts for Christmas. But one thing will always remain a secret. No one ever knew what Santa told the Governor to whisper in Meki's ear at exactly "Three minutes before Xmas." Forever and ever that will be a secret between the Governor and Santa. □

Beauty

On The Beach

Schirley Luruso

She is from Maracaibo, Venezuela. This is her eight time visiting Aruba, she is staying with her family at Playa Linda Beach Resort.

She is from Michigan. Her first time in Aruba. She loves the Aruban Beach and local food.

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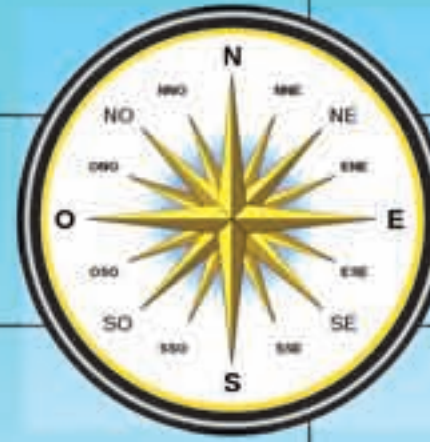
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Kane's point streak 10, Blackhawks win

The Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tennessee (AP)

— Duncan Keith scored a goal and added an assist to lead the Chicago Blackhawks to a 3-1 win over the Nashville Predators on Tuesday night.

Patrick Kane and Nick Leddy also scored for the Stanley Cup champions, who have won five of six.

Shea Weber scored for the Predators. Keith scored the game's first goal at 1:29 of the opening period on a slap shot from the left side that beat Carter Hutton on the stick side.

Making his fourth consecutive start, Hutton had his three-game winning streak snapped. Hutton spent the past two seasons in the Blackhawks organization before signing with Nashville in the offseason.

DUCKS 5, RED WINGS 2

DETROIT (AP) — Sami Vatanen had a goal and an assist, and Anaheim used a four-goal first period to extend its winning streak to six games with a victory over Detroit.

Nick Bonino, Jakob Silfverberg, Corey Perry



Chicago Blackhawks center Jonathan Toews (19) celebrates a goal by teammate Patrick Kane against Nashville Predators goalie Carter Hutton (30) in the first period of an NHL hockey game Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2013, in Nashville, Tenn.

Associated Press

and Saku Koivu also scored for the Ducks. Andrew Cogliano had three assists and Jonas Hiller made 16 saves.

Tomas Jurco got his first career goal and Daniel Cleary scored for Detroit, which has lost its past six (0-4-2). Jonas Gustavsson stopped eight of 11 shots before being replaced by Petr Mrazek late in the first period. Mrazek made 17 saves.

SHARKS 4, BLUES 2

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Joe Pavelski scored the first of three straight goals by San Jose, and Antti Niemi stopped 20 shots to lead the Sharks over St. Louis.

San Jose completed a season sweep of the Blues, winning all three games by a combined 16-7. St. Louis has lost two in a row after winning eight of 11.

Matt Irwin, Brent Burns and Marty Havlat added goals for the Sharks, who led 3-0 after 22 minutes. Niemi improved to 18-6-6.

Kevin Shattenkirk and Jay Bouwmeester scored second-period goals for

Continued on Page 22



In this June 4, 2007, file photo, tennis champion Billie Jean King is introduced during a town hall conversation hosted by the group Women for Hillary in New York.

Associated Press

EDDIE PELLIS

AP National Writer

President Barack Obama sent Russia a clear message about its treatment of

gays and lesbians with his choices to represent the United States at the Sochi Olympics.

Tennis great Billie Jean King

Obama selects gay athletes for Sochi delegation

will be one of two openly gay athletes in the U.S. delegation for the opening and closing ceremonies that Obama announced Tuesday. For the first time since 2000, however, the U.S. will not send a president, former president, first lady or vice president to the Games. Russia has come under fierce criticism for passing national laws banning "gay propaganda." Though the White House did not specifically address

the Russian laws in making its announcement, spokesman Shin Inouye said the delegation "represents the diversity that is the United States" and that Obama "knows they will showcase to the world the best of America — diversity, determination and teamwork." The White House said Obama's schedule will not permit him to attend the Games.

"It's a positive sign to see openly gay representatives

in the delegation," said Michael Cole-Schwartz, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, a gay advocacy group which recently sent a letter urging Obama to include gays and lesbians in the delegation. "Hopefully it sends a message to the Russian people and the rest of the world that the United States values the civil and human rights of LGBT people."

Continued on Page 22

Novak Djokovic hires Boris Becker as coach

MONACO (AP) — Novak Djokovic is turning to Boris Becker for help in 2014. The second-ranked Serb said Wednesday that Becker will join his staff for next season as head coach. "He is a true legend, someone who has great tennis knowledge and his experience will help me win new trophies from the Grand Slams and other tournaments," Djokovic said in a statement. "Becker is a

great person, too, and I am sure he will fit in our team in the best possible way." The 46-year-old Becker, a six-time Grand Slam champion, will travel with Djokovic and other coaches to tournaments, including next month's Australian Open. Djokovic won his fourth Australian Open title last year and finished the 2013 season ranked No. 2 in the world behind Rafael Nadal.

Becker will join a coaching staff that also includes Marian Vajda, Miljan Amanovic and Gebhard Phil-Gritsch. "I will do my best to help him reach his goals, and I am sure we can achieve great things together," said Becker, who became the youngest man to win Wimbledon when he was 17 in 1985. Vajda, who has been working with Djokovic since 2006, said the Serb needed a new head coach to con-



Djokovic, SWilliams win ITF awards for 2013

LONDON (AP) — Novak Djokovic and Serena Williams are the International Tennis Federation's world champions for 2013. Djokovic captured the men's award for the third successive year, and Williams took the honor for the fourth time. Djokovic started the year

by winning a third straight Australian Open and was runner-up at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. The 26-year-old Serb finished the season No. 2 in the ATP rankings with seven tour titles. The 32-year-old Williams won the French Open and U.S. Open in 2013 to end

the year No. 1 in the WTA rankings for the first time since 2009. American twins Bob and Mike Bryan were named men's doubles world champions for the 10th time in 11 years, while Sara Errani and Roberta Vinci of Italy took the women's doubles award. □

In this Wednesday, July 25, 2012 file photo, Boris Becker, left, arrives for the 'Sports For Peace' Fundraising Ball at The V&A museum in central London; and Novak Djokovic of Serbia, right, plays a return to Juan Martin Del Potro of Argentina during their Men's singles semifinal match at the All England Lawn Tennis Championships in Wimbledon, London, Friday, July 5, 2013 file photo.

Associated Press

tinue improving. "Becker's assignment will not affect much my position in the team, since I will do all I can for Novak, just like I did before," Vajda

said. "On the other hand, choosing Boris as the head coach is a good solution, I am sure we will get along very well, and that Novak will continue to progress." □

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Warriors whip Pelicans 104-93 in Iguodala's return

OAKLAND, California (AP) — Stephen Curry had 28 points and 12 assists, David Lee added 21 points and 17 rebounds and the Golden State Warriors beat the short-handed New Orleans Pelicans 104-93 on Tuesday night in Andre Iguodala's long-awaited return. NBA Capsules

Iguodala finished with two points and two assists in 17 minutes after missing the previous 12 games with a right hamstring injury. The Warriors led by 10 points in the first quarter, 18 at half-time and 26 late in the third quarter.

The Pelicans played without injured starters Anthony Davis (broken left hand) and Tyreke Evans (sprained left ankle). Ryan Anderson had 21 points and six rebounds and Jason Smith scored 12 for New Orleans, which has lost its first two games of a five-game trip. The Warriors outshot the Pelicans 45.1 to 37.5 percent and outrebounded them 58 to 44 to control the game — for the most part — from start to finish. New Orleans made a brief run in the fourth quarter against Golden State's backups before the starters returned and restored order.

The Warriors went 5-7 after Iguodala injured his hamstring Nov. 22, losing three of its last four games.



Portland Trail Blazers' Damian Lillard (0) jumps to the basket against Cleveland Cavaliers' Kyrie Irving (2) during the first quarter of an NBA basketball game Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2013, in Cleveland.

Associated Press

TRAIL BLAZERS 119, CAVALIERS 116

CLEVELAND (AP) — Damian Lillard made a tie-breaking 3-pointer with 0.4 seconds remaining, lifting Portland to the road win. Lillard had a career-high eight 3-pointers while scoring 36 points. The 2013 NBA Rookie of the Year also had a fadeaway jumper as time

expired to give Portland a 111-109 overtime victory over Detroit on Sunday. Portland (22-4) has the best record in the NBA and is 11-0 against the Eastern Conference. The Blazers have won five straight and are 12-2 on the road.

Kyrie Irving's bid for a tying 3-pointer bounced off the

back of the rim at the buzzer. Irving and Dion Waiters scored 25 points apiece for Cleveland.

LaMarcus Aldridge had 26 points and 15 rebounds for Portland.

THUNDER 105, NUGGETS 93 DENVER (AP) — Kevin Durant scored 30 points, powering the Thunder to their seventh consecutive victory.

Durant had 30 or more points in a game for the 12th time this season, most in the NBA. He is averaging a league-high 28.6 points.

Russell Westbrook had 21 points, 13 rebounds and eight assists for the Thunder. Serge Ibaka added 17 points and 10 rebounds.

Denver had won 10 of 13. J.J. Hickson had 20 points and 14 rebounds, but the Nuggets dropped to 0-2 this season against Oklahoma City. Ty Lawson added 17 points and 13 assists.

LAKERS 96, GRIZZLIES 92

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Kobe Bryant scored 21 points in his sixth game of the season, and the Lakers closed out a four-game road trip with a victory.

Pau Gasol added 21 points and nine rebounds for the Lakers, who were coming off a 114-100 loss at Atlanta on Monday night. Nick Young had 18 points, and Jodie Meeks finished with 13.

Zach Randolph had 18

points and a season-high 16 rebounds for Memphis. The Grizzlies played without Mike Conley, who sat out after bruising his left thigh in Sunday's loss to Minnesota. The Grizzlies led 69-67 in the fourth quarter before the Lakers went on a 17-4 run. Bryant played 32 minutes, matching his most action since returning from his torn left Achilles' tendon. He was 9 for 18 from the field, both season highs, despite running the offense most of the night.

BOBCATS 95, KINGS 87

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Kemba Walker scored 24 points, helping Charlotte snap a three-game losing streak.

Gerald Henderson added 20 points and reserve Ramon Sessions scored 16 for the Bobcats, who went 8 for 17 from 3-point range. Walker also had five assists in his 10th game with at least 20 points.

DeMarcus Cousins had 30 points and 17 rebounds for Sacramento, which shot 37.5 percent from the field. The Kings have dropped three of four.

Kings forward Rudy Gay scored four points on 1-of-6 shooting in his worst game since he was acquired in a seven-player trade with Toronto on Dec. 9. He departed with 5:23 left in the third quarter due to right knee stiffness. □

NHL Capsules

Continued from Page 18

the Blues.

BRUINS 2, FLAMES 0

BOSTON (AP) — Zdeno Chara scored two power-play goals and Jarome Iginla had a pair of assists against his former team to help Boston beat Calgary. David Krejci also had two assists and Tuukka Rask made 21 saves for the Bruins in their third straight shutout of the Flames in Boston. Rask picked up his third shutout of the season and extended Calgary's scoreless streak in Boston to 189 minutes, 36 seconds. Reto Berra kept Calgary close, stopping 29 shots as

the Bruins controlled play most of the game.

Boston outshot the Flames 31-21 one week after rallying for a 2-1 win in Iginla's return to Calgary, where he played 16 seasons and spent nine as the team's captain.

KINGS 3, OILERS 0

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Martin Jones made 24 saves for his third shutout in five games, and the remarkable rookie led Los Angeles to a victory over Edmonton.

Dwight King and Jordan Nolan scored during another dominant night for Jones, who became the first goalie in Kings history to begin his career with six consecutive victories. Edmonton couldn't solve Jones, who has allowed just



A shot by Chicago Blackhawks forward Patrick Kane gets past Nashville Predators goalie Carter Hutton for a goal in the first period of an NHL hockey game Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2013, in Nashville, Tenn.

Associated Press

five goals in his six games. Ilya Bryzgalov stopped 37 shots for the last-place Oilers, who have lost four straight.

Dustin Brown added an empty-net goal for the Kings, who have won seven of eight while taking just two regulation losses in 20 games since Nov. 2 (14-2-4).

PANTHERS 3, MAPLE LEAFS 1

TORONTO (AP) — Tomas Fleischmann, Sean Bergenheim and Brad Boyes scored for Florida against slumping Toronto. The Panthers have won four straight and six of seven.

Mason Raymond scored for the Maple Leafs, who were playing the second

Yankees hit with \$28M luxury tax



In this Dec. 13, 2013 file photo, Jacoby Ellsbury, left, and New York Yankees manager Joe Girardi hold Ellsbury's jersey during a news conference at Yankee Stadium in New York. The outfielder agreed to a \$153 million seven-year contract. While the Yankees set another salary record, the Houston Astros had the lowest average in the major leagues in 14 years and the attention of the players' union.

Associated Press

RONALD BLUM
AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The New York Yankees were hit with a \$28 million luxury tax bill, pushing their total past the \$250 million mark since the penalty began in 2003. According to Major League Baseball calculations sent to teams on Tuesday, the Los Angeles Dodgers were the only other team that exceeded the tax threshold this year and must pay \$11.4 million. Boston finished just under for the second straight year, coming in \$225,666 shy of the \$178 million mark. Figures include average annual values of contracts

for players on 40-man rosters, earned bonuses and escalators, adjustments for cash in trades and \$10.8 million per team in benefits. Because the Yankees have been over the tax threshold at least four consecutive times, they pay at a 50 percent rate on the overage, and their \$28,113,945 bill was second only to their \$34.1 million payment following the 2005 season. The Yankees are responsible for \$252.7 million of the \$285.1 million in tax paid by all clubs over the past 11 years. Yankees owner Hal Steinbrenner said he hopes to get under the threshold next year, when it rises to

\$189 million. That would reset the team's tax rate to 17.5 percent for 2015 and get the Yankees some revenue-sharing refunds. But following agreements on Tuesday on a \$2 million, one-year deal with second baseman Brian Roberts and a \$7 million, two-year contract with pitcher Matt Thornton, the Yankees are at \$177.7 million for 15 players next year, when benefits are likely to total between \$11 million and \$12 million. Their only hope to get below the threshold appears to be if an arbitrator upholds most of Alex Rodriguez's 211-game suspension, relieving the team of a large percentage of the third baseman's \$25 million salary. Tax money is used to fund player benefits and MLB's Industry Growth Fund. The Yankees finished with the highest regular payroll for the 15th consecutive year, winding up at a record \$237,018,889. The Dodgers, in their first full season under new ownership, were just \$146,647 behind after nearly doubling spending from \$129.1 million. Los Angeles had a higher

payroll for the tax: \$243 million to New York's \$234 million. But because the Dodgers didn't exceed the threshold in 2012, they pay at a 17.5 percent rate and owe \$11,415,959. They would pay at a 30 percent rate if they exceed the threshold next year. Houston, which lost more than 100 games for the third straight season, had a payroll at \$29.3 million, the

lowest total in MLB since the 2008 Florida Marlins and just \$1.3 million more than Rodriguez made with the Yankees. The average salary increased 7.1 percent, to \$3,326,645 from \$3,105,093, according to MLB's calculations, the steepest rise since 2006. The players' association has not yet released its final figures for this year. □



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SUN & HOL 2:40 | 5:05 | 7:30

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MON - THURS 4:00 | 6:20 | 8:45
FRI 4:00 | 6:20 | 8:45 | 11:10
SAT 1:55 | 4:00 | 6:20 | 8:45 | 11:10
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FRI 4:30 | 6:40 | 8:50 | 11:00
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SUN & HOL 2:20 | 4:30 | 6:40 | 8:50



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Column: De Niro and Stallone in one for the aged

TIM DAHLBERG

AP Sports Columnist

The last time Robert De Niro laced on the gloves for the big screen he delivered a knockout as Jake LaMotta in "Raging Bull."

More than 30 years later, he was given a chance to fight again. But he wasn't going to do it without the undisputed champion of boxing movies, Rocky himself. Raging Bull, meet Aging Bull. It's De Niro vs. Sylvester Stallone in a geriatric battle for the aged. "It was just common sense who did it," De Niro said. "It could have gone either way for me if he didn't do it." The question might have been why do it at all. Implausible at best, the tale of two 60-something former light heavyweight champions coming out of retirement to fight each other in an HBO pay-per-view event is a stretch even by Hollywood standards. It wouldn't work as a drama like "Raging Bull" or any of the six "Rocky" movies. But "Grudge Match" excels as comedy, with enough laugh-out-loud moments and good cheer to put it in the early running for the feel-good movie of the holiday season. Grudgement Day anyone? "I haven't been very lucky in comedy," Stallone said. "But I'm taking a character that got me here so it didn't



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Robert De Niro as Billy 'The Kid' McDonnen, left, and Sylvester Stallone as Henry 'Razor' Sharp, in a scene from "Grudge Match." One was once the Raging Bull himself. The other is, of course, Rocky. Boxing has made for a lot of great story lines on the big screen, but the latest one matching 60-something actors Robert De Niro and Sylvester Stallone may be the biggest stretch ever.

Associated Press

take a lot of persuasion." That character, of course, is Rocky Balboa, first seen in the original "Rocky" movie in 1976 and reprised in various forms five times since. The last was "Rocky Balboa" in 2006 in which the fighter comes out of retirement to take on champion Mason Dixon for the heavyweight title. The story line for that film was similar, including the HBO pay-per-view that Rocky barely loses in a brutal fight. The difference

this time is "Grudge Match" is more or less a parody, played mostly for laughs. Instead of a tearful scene at a cemetery there's Stallone and De Niro butchering the national anthem at a monster truck event. Instead of an inspirational talk from the corner, there's trainer Alan Arkin urging Stallone's Henry "Razor" Sharp to toughen up his hands by dipping them in horse urine. And then there's a postscript to the ending

featuring a couple of real fighters who show some comedic chops of their own. What is somewhat the same is De Niro and Stallone had to trade punches, something that can be a bit dicey for actor/boxers in their 30s, much less late 60s. Stallone drew on his choreography from the Rocky movies for the fight scenes, which come across realistic enough as long as you suspend disbelief for a few moments and accept the premise two senior

citizens can still fight. "There are thousands and thousands of punch combinations that have been practiced in films," Stallone said in a phone interview with The Associated Press. "Some work and some don't. I brought things that worked in six Rocky's and made them age appropriate. I knew it would have the desired results." It helped that De Niro had experience in staging fights from "Raging Bull." Thankfully, he didn't have the liver punch that Mr. T threw during filming of "Rocky III" that left Stallone writhing in pain on the canvas. "There were some close calls, some nicks in this film, that I could see on playback," Stallone said. "Your adrenaline is up, you're in front of the crowd and you're not tuned into your own body. It was sort of like just being in the moment of a fight." The fight takes place in Pittsburgh, where Stallone's character works in a factory after losing all his money in early retirement. De Niro's Billy "The Kid" McDonnen is better off with a used car lot and bar but he still yearns for the one thing that was taken away from him — a chance to beat his hated rival in the rubber match after splitting two fights 30 years earlier. □

Sochi

Continued from Page 18

King said she was "deeply honored" to be named to the delegation.

"I am equally proud to stand with the members of the LGBT community in support of all athletes who will be competing in Sochi and I hope these Olympic Games will indeed be a watershed moment for the universal acceptance of all people," said King, who will attend the opening ceremony.

Hockey player Caitlin Cahow is the other openly gay representative to the delegation. She'll attend

the closing ceremony. The U.S. Olympic Committee made no comment about the sexual orientation of the delegation. In a nod to its disapproval of the law, however, the USOC recently revised its non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation.

France and Germany are among the other countries who will not send their presidents to Sochi for the Games.

Earlier this year, Obama rejected the idea of a U.S. boycott of the Olympics despite a number of differences with Russia, including the anti-gay law.

This move, however, sends

a strong signal: In 2010, Vice President Joe Biden led the delegation, and in 2012, first lady Michelle Obama held the honor. This year's group is led by former Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano. Others in the delegation include U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, figure skater Brian Boitano and presidential adviser Rob Nabors.

King might be the most recognizable face in the group. She's a 39-time Grand Slam title winner (singles, doubles and mixed), a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and one of the most prominent advocates

of equality for women in sports and society over the past several decades.

She will attend the Olympics in a country that is creating tension for several key players because of the laws, including the International Olympic Committee, which awarded the Games to Russia.

Earlier this month, IOC President Thomas Bach said Russia would set up public protest zones in Sochi for "people who want to express their opinion or want to demonstrate for or against something." Meanwhile, the IOC approved a letter going out to athletes reminding them to refrain from protests or

political gestures during the Sochi Games — reiterating Rule 50 of the Olympic charter, which forbids demonstrations on Olympic grounds.

Bach had previously said he'd received assurances from Russian President Vladimir Putin that gays will not be discriminated against in Sochi. But the Russian law has raised questions about what could happen to athletes who wear pins or badges or carry flags supporting gay rights.

Earlier this fall, skier Bode Miller was one of the few American athletes to speak out against the Russian law, calling it "absolutely embarrassing." □

U.S. high-tech startup hopes to change biking

RODRIGUE NGOWI

Associated Press

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts (AP) — A U.S. startup

is launching a new device that transforms almost any bicycle into an electric-hybrid vehicle using an app on a smartphone.

The device, called the Copenhagen Wheel, is installed as part of a rear hub of a bike wheel and is packed with a proprietary computer, batteries and sensors that monitor how hard a rider is pedaling and activate an onboard motor whenever support is needed. The device uses wireless connectivity to communicate with the biker's smartphone to track distance traveled and elevation gained, share with friends the number of calories burned and lock the wheel remotely as soon as the owner walks away from the bike.

"The motor integrates itself with the rider's motion very, very seamlessly," said Assaf Biderman, who co-invented the device at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's SENSEable City Lab, where he is asso-

ciate director. "It's almost like having a riding companion riding together with you, making the ride easier, simpler."

The combination of power from the Copenhagen Wheel and the cyclist's energy can make an average biker move "almost like a Tour-de-France-level athlete in your daily commute," said Biderman, who founded Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Superpedestrian Inc. that secured an exclusive license for the technology from MIT.

The Copenhagen Wheel packs sufficient power to propel a rider as fast as 60 kph (37.28 mph), but developers have put speed limits in software to meet local speed limits, effectively turning off the motor once the speed reaches 20 mph in the U.S. and 25 kilometers in Europe. The concept was inspired by a simple question: "How can we get more people to cycle?" Biderman said. The project received funding from the Italian ministry of the environment and office of the mayor of Copenhagen, a Danish city known as one

of the most bicycle friendly locations in the world and whose tourism website says 55 percent of its residents bike 1.2 million kilometers (750,000 miles) every day.

The initial 1,000 units of the Copenhagen Wheel became available for pre-order through the Superpedestrian website earlier this month. Two weeks later, at least 810 had been sold for \$699 each, the majority of them to customers in the U.S. Other orders went to Europe, Australia, Kenya, Madagascar and elsewhere. Shipping is scheduled for next spring.

The Copenhagen Wheel does not replace a cyclist's existing bicycle. Consumers get the stylish hubcap-sized device already installed on a new rear wheel that fits their current bicycle. They remove the current wheel from their bike and install the souped-up unit and they are ready to go. The batteries are rechargeable. The Copenhagen Wheel seeks to tap into a lucrative and highly competitive market for electric bikes, also known as e-bikes. □



In this Thursday, Dec. 12, 2013 photo, Assaf Biderman, co-inventor of the Copenhagen Wheel and Associate Director of the SENSEable City Laboratory at MIT, poses with his invention at Superpedestrian, his venture-backed company in Cambridge, Mass.

Associated Press

Facebook testing video advertisements

BREE FOWLER

AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Investors are giving a thumbs-up to the idea of Facebook making hundreds of millions in new revenue from video advertisements, but some users argue that the social network is already too cluttered and has become more about commercialism than communing with friends.

Facebook said Tuesday that it is testing video advertisements that show up in its users' news feeds. As part of the test, Facebook said some of its users on Thursday will see a series of videos teasing Summit Entertainment's upcoming release of "Divergent," a film based on a young adult novel with the same name, in their feeds.

The Menlo Park, California-based company says

the idea is still in the testing phase and that it's not currently selling video ads. The company wouldn't disclose pricing, but said its goal is for the test feature is to make it a premium advertising product that's used to reach large audiences at specific times.

Facebook's shares, which have posted substantial gains over the past four months, hit an all-time high of \$55.18 on the news, before closing up \$1.05, or 2 percent, at \$54.86.

Citi analyst Mark May backed his "buy" rating for Facebook's stock on Tuesday, noting that the video advertising effort could add more than half a billion dollars to the company's revenue next year and up to \$1 billion by 2016.

Advertising, in general, has already helped Facebook achieve enormous growth

in recent years. The company's revenue grew from \$3.71 billion in 2011 to \$5.09 billion in 2012. Revenue was \$5.29 billion through the first

nine months of this year. While an additional revenue boost would be good for Facebook's bottom line, the company needs

to proceed with caution. People have grown accustomed to video ads online, but Facebook is seen as a place where users connect with friends and family and is often perceived as a more personal setting than other websites where video ads may not seem as intrusive.

Some users insist Facebook's intimate feel started disappearing long ago. They point to the combination of targeted advertisements that run along the right side of a user's news feed and what they see as increasingly inane posts from some of their "friends."

Jon Knott, a 22-year-old Facebook user from Chicago, says video ads could be the "final straw" for young adults like him, who are growing tired of Facebook's busy nature. □



In this photo taken Wednesday, Dec. 4, 2013, co-founders Preston Rutherford, left, and Tom Montgomery, right, review user generated content for the upcoming week's social posts at the headquarters of Chubbies Shorts in San Francisco. Chubbies uses Facebook for marketing tools like videos that users will share with their friends. It uses Twitter for conversations with customers, and posts photos on Instagram to create buzz about their products.

Associated Press

Stocks soar as Fed cuts stimulus, citing jobs

KEN SWEET
AP Markets Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The stock market had a swift and clear reaction to the Federal Reserve's decision to trim its stimulus efforts: This wasn't so bad after all. Stocks surged Wednesday, lifting the Dow Jones industrial average nearly 300 points, after the Fed decided it was time to start modestly scaling back its program to boost America's growth and stock market. The central bank cited a stronger jobs market and improving economy. Stock investors had long anticipated the Fed would pull back at some point, but did not think it would happen until next year. Despite the surprise, investors took the central bank's decision Wednesday as a sign that the stock market was strong enough to keep soaring, even with a less rocket fuel from the Fed.

"Investors should see this as a vote of confidence for the economy," said Kristina Hooper, head of U.S. investment strategies for Allianz Global Investors. The Dow jumped 292 points, or nearly 2 percent, to 16,167.97 — another all-time high for the blue-chip index. Shortly before the Fed announcement at 2 p.m., the Dow was up just 47 points.

The broader Standard & Poor's 500 index rose 29 points, also 2 percent, to 1,810.65 and the Nasdaq composite rose 46 points, or 1 percent, to 4,070.06. The rally adds to what has already been a historic run for stocks. The S&P 500 is up nearly 27 percent, its best yearly performance since the dot-com boom of the late 1990s.

The Fed's decision removes

Art Steinmetz, president and chief investment officer at OppenheimerFunds. With no economic downturn on the horizon, stocks are expected to continue their rise in 2014, with market strategists predicting gains of 6 percent to 8 percent from current levels. Starting in January, the Fed will reduce its bond-buying program to \$75 billion a month from \$85 billion now.

investors to shift money into stocks. That's because the Fed's purchases made bond prices artificially more expensive in comparison to stocks.

The program has given the Fed a big role in the current bull market. The S&P 500 index has surged about 26 percent since the Fed announced a year ago that it would buy the \$85 billion in bonds each month. And since the central bank's first round of bond buying at the end of 2008, stocks have soared about 124 percent.

In the last month, as signs emerged of that hiring was picking up, the housing market was improving and manufacturing was strengthening, investors grew more confident that markets could gain traction without stimulus.

The Fed also said Wednesday it is likely to keep cutting its bond purchases. Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke, who is nearing the end of his tenure, said the bank will likely vote for "measured reductions" in upcoming meetings, as long as the economy shows improvement.

Bernanke also said Janet Yellen, who becomes Fed chairwoman once she is confirmed by the Senate, "fully supports" the bank's decision to start reducing stimulus. □



Traders surround the post of specialist Charles Boedinghaus, left center, on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013. Stocks surged after the Federal Reserve decided the U.S. economy was strong enough for it to reduce its stimulus efforts. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

a huge amount of uncertainty for investors, something they hate. The fate of the stimulus program had hung over investors' heads since May. Now that investors have an outline for how the Fed will pull back, investors can now move forward.

"The Fed believed the market could handle it," said

The so-called tapering will be the first step toward winding down a program that has been in place, in one form or another, since the financial crisis.

By purchasing bonds and depressing yields, the Fed has kept interest rates low and encouraged borrowing and lending. But all that buying has also led

JPMorgan Chase sues US FDIC for more than \$1B

The Associated Press

JPMorgan is suing the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. to recover more than \$1 billion tied to its purchase of Washington Mutual when that bank failed in 2008.

In a federal court complaint, the biggest U.S. bank said that the FDIC failed to honor obligations under the Washington Mutual agreement, and that has subjected JP Morgan to massive liability.

The FDIC became the receiver for Seattle-based Washington Mutual when it collapsed during the height of the financial crisis in September 2008. It was the largest bank failure in U.S. history. The FDIC brokered the sale of Washington Mutual's assets to JP Morgan for \$1.9 billion. JPMorgan said the FDIC made promises to indemnify or protect the bank against liabilities if it stepped in. New York-based JP Morgan Chase & Co. said in a court filing Tuesday that the FDIC later declined to acknowledge that government and investors' claims against JP Morgan for sales of Washington Mutual's risky mortgage-backed securities should have been claims against the receivership, not the bank. Most of JPMorgan's mortgage-backed securities came from Washington Mutual and the investment bank Bear Stearns, which it also acquired in 2008. The FDIC did not immediately return calls seeking comment from The Associated Press early Wednesday. The FDIC has said that JPMorgan should be responsible for any liabilities regarding the Washington Mutual acquisition. The Washington Mutual receivership's assets are about \$2.75 billion, according to JPMorgan.

JP Morgan has entered into a series of legal settlements over its sales of mortgage-backed securities in the years preceding the financial crisis. As the housing market collapsed between 2006 and 2008, millions of homeowners defaulted on high-risk mortgages. □

US home construction hits highest pace in 5 years

C. S. RUGABER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. builders broke ground on homes at the fastest pace in more than five years, strong evidence that the housing recovery is accelerating despite higher mortgage rates.

The Commerce Department said Wednesday that developers began construction on houses and apartments in November at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.09 million. That's 23 percent more than October's pace of 889,000 and the fastest since February 2008, just a few months after the recession began.

Construction of single-fam-

ily homes jumped 21 percent to an annual pace of 727,000, also the highest in more than five years. Apartment construction soared 26 percent to a 354,000 annual pace.

Permits for future building slipped 3 percent to just over 1 million, down from 1.04 million in October. The drop reflected a decline in apartments, which can be volatile. Permits for single-family homes rose.

"Evidently, builders in the field are genuinely confident about the outlook for sales of new single-family houses, despite the rise in mortgage rates," said Pierre Ellis, an economist at Decision Economics.

The housing market has

been improving steadily since early last year, but construction had leveled off this summer after first reaching a 1 million annual pace in March. Last month's surge comes as mortgage rates remain about a percentage point higher than they were in the spring. That suggests home building will boost economic growth in the final three months of the year.

The average rate on a 30-year mortgage fell to 4.42 percent last week. That's down from a peak of 4.6 percent in August.

Rates jumped by more than a full percentage point after Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke

first suggested in May that the Fed would pull back on its \$85 billion bond-buying program before the end of the year. The Fed concludes a two-day meeting Wednesday, but most economists expect it won't start reducing its purchases until January or March.

Home construction soared in the Midwest and South, while it fell in the Northeast and rose modestly in the West.

The surge comes as homebuilders are more confident. The National Association of Home Builders/Wells Fargo builder sentiment index, released Tuesday, matched an eight-year high first reached in August. □

Boeing exec shuffle puts 2 in next CEO race

JOSHUA FREED
AP Business Writer

Boeing handed new titles to two of its top executives, giving an indication of where it is headed when current Chairman and CEO Jim McNerney retires. Defense chief Dennis A. Muilenburg was promoted to president and chief operating officer, and named as vice chairman of the company. Raymond L. Conner was also named vice chairman, and will continue to run Boeing's commercial airplanes division.

Boeing spokesman John Dern said the moves are part of Boeing's process for planning for the eventual retirement of McNerney, 64.

Boeing's retirement age for executives is 65, although the board can ask them to stay longer and it has in the past, Dern said. He declined to say whether McNerney is seeking to stay past 65. "There aren't any current plans for his retirement," Dern said.

Boeing's airplane and defense units used to be roughly equal by revenue, but booming sales of commercial planes have pushed that division ahead. Conner, 58, has been leading Boeing's commercial airplane division since June 2012. He has run Boeing's 777 and 747 programs, and was leading sales for commercial airplanes when he got the job running that division.

Muilenburg, 49, has been running Boeing's defense unit since 2009. Before that he was president of its military support and services business.

The moves leave Conner running Boeing's largest division and reporting directly to McNerney, as will new defense chief Christopher Chadwick, Dern said.

Muilenburg is no longer running his own division, but Boeing's announcement suggested that he'll be working closely with McNerney on corporate issues and projects. □

Ford warning on pricing, profit margins hits stock

TOM KRISHER
AP Auto Writer
DETROIT (AP) —

Ford Motor Co. warned of tough price competition and harder-to-reach profit targets Wednesday, a sign that the company and the auto industry face a tougher road after four years of robust recovery from the Great Recession.

Ford said its pretax profit next year would drop as much as \$1.5 billion below a near-record level of \$8.5 billion in 2013. The compa-

ny will have to slow price increases in North America — or even boost discounts on some models — and its costs will rise because of an ambitious launch of almost two dozen vehicles worldwide. U.S. auto sales have risen by more than 1 million vehicles annually since 2009, but many analysts have said that pace isn't sustainable. Joe Hinrichs, who runs Ford's North and South American operations, told The Associated Press Monday that he ex-

pects sales growth to slow in 2014. At a conference for analysts on Wednesday, Chief Financial Officer Bob Shanks warned that Ford's profit margins in North America will shrink because of price competition in the U.S., the cost of launching nearly two dozen new vehicles worldwide and economic conditions in Europe and South America. That spooked investors — one analyst called it panic selling — and drove the company's shares

down more than 7 percent on about five times the normal volume.

Investors worried about Ford's profits slipping after the company predicted \$7 billion to \$8 billion before taxes next year. They also fretted about price competition in the U.S., where Ford makes most of its money, and about company guidance that it wouldn't hit profit margin targets for the middle of the decade.

Continued on Page 27



J Mays, Ford's global design chief, describes the features on the automaker's new 2015 Ford Mustang in Dearborn, Mich. Ford Motor Co. warned of tough price competition and harder-to-reach profit targets Wednesday, a sign that the company and the auto industry face a tougher road after four years of robust recovery from the Great Recession. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

UN predicts increased global economic growth

EDITH M. LEDERER
Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The United Nations on Wednesday predicted that the global economy will grow by at least 3 percent annually in the next two years following signs of improvement in many regions. In its annual economic report, the U.N. said the world experienced subdued growth for a second year, estimating growth in 2013 at 2.1 percent. But the U.N. forecast economic growth of 3 percent in 2014 and 3.3 percent in 2015, based largely on this year's third quarter performance.

According to the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2014, a protracted recession in countries us-

ing the euro has finally ended, U.S. economic growth strengthened somewhat, and China and India experienced moderate increased growth after two years of backsliding.

All these factors point to increasing growth in the world economy, it said.

Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development Shamshad Akhtar cautioned that the forecast "is made in the context of many uncertainties and risks coming from possible policy missteps as well as non-economic factors that could stymie growth."

The report warned that as the U.S. Federal Reserve takes expected action to taper off and eventually end its huge bond-buy-

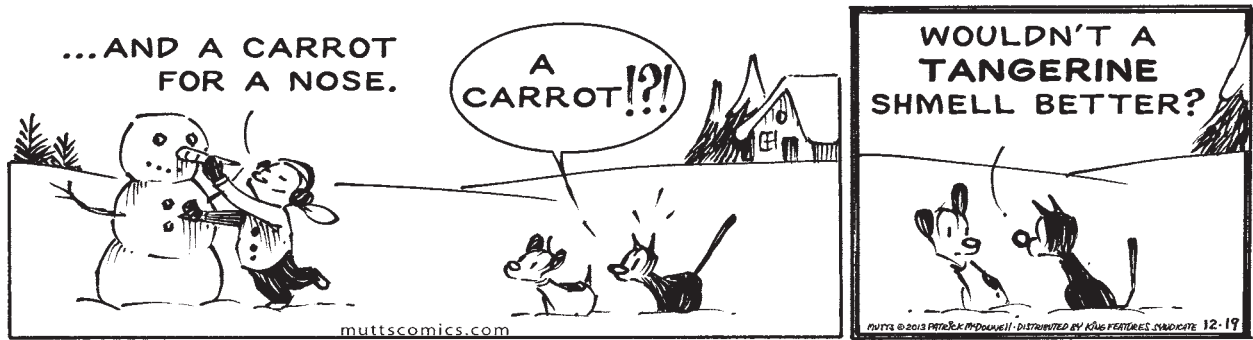
ing program to stimulate the economy, "emerging economies will face more external shocks." It also cited fragility in the banking system and economies in the euro area, ongoing political wrangling in the U.S. Congress on the budget and debt ceiling, and geopolitical tensions in western Asia and elsewhere.

These and other unexpected events could derail the world economy beyond the U.N.'s projections, the report said. The U.N. forecast that inflation will remain tame worldwide, that employment will remain a major challenge, and that the price of most primary commodities will remain flat despite moderate growth in international trade to 4.7

percent in 2014.

In developed countries, the U.N. forecast a 2.5 percent increase in GDP in the United States in 2014, and a 1.5 percent growth in GDP in Western Europe and in Japan next year. In key developing countries, it forecast that growth in Brazil will rebound to 3 percent in 2014, that China will maintain 7.5 percent growth in the next few years, that India's growth will improve to above 5 percent in 2014, and that Russia's economic growth will recover modestly to 2.9 percent in 2014. The U.N. said Africa's growth prospects remain relatively robust — up from an estimated 4 percent rise in GDP in 2013 to 4.7 percent in 2014. □

Mutts



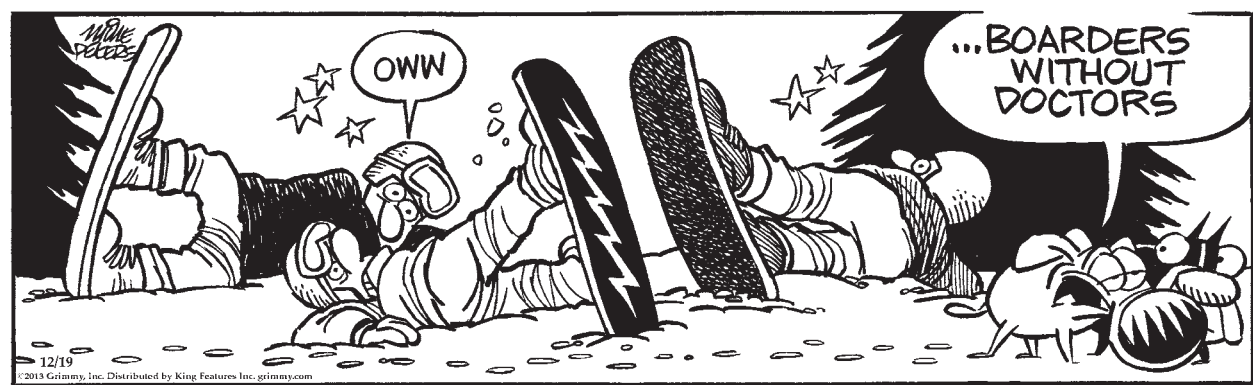
6 Chix



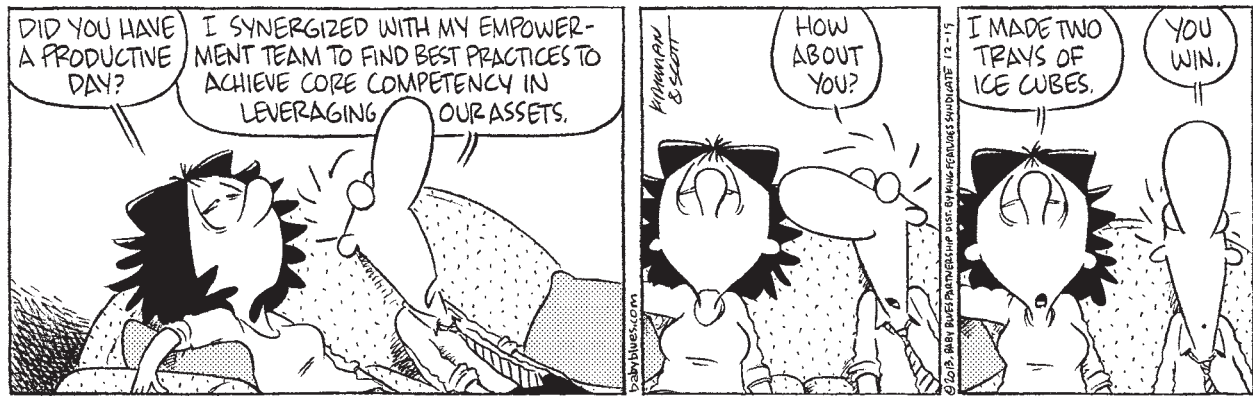
Blondie



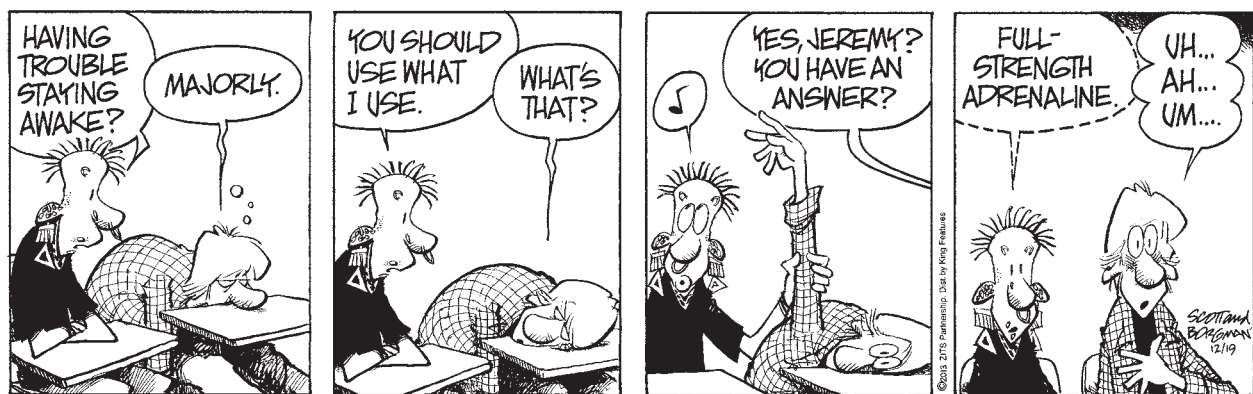
Mother Goose & Grimm



Baby Blues



Zits



Conceptis Sudoku

1				3				6
				4		7		
3	2						1	9
	5						6	
6				5				3
	7						8	
7	8						4	1
			9		8			
9				4				7

Difficulty Level ★★★

12/19

Sudoku is a number-placing puzzle based on a 9x9 grid with several given numbers. The object is to place the numbers 1 to 9 in the empty squares so that each row, each column and each 3x3 box contains the same number only once. The difficulty level of the Conceptis Sudoku increases from Monday to Sunday.

Yesterday's puzzle answer

4	1	8	6	3	9	5	2	7
9	6	3	5	2	7	4	1	8
5	7	2	8	1	4	9	3	6
2	9	5	7	4	8	3	6	1
1	8	6	3	9	5	2	7	4
7	3	4	2	6	1	8	5	9
8	2	1	9	7	3	6	4	5
3	5	7	4	8	6	1	9	2
6	4	9	1	5	2	7	8	3

ACROSS

- 1 ___ person;
- apiece
- 4 Breathes audibly in relief
- 9 Blockhead
- 13 Take the lid off of
- 15 Scouting group
- 16 Arden & others
- 17 Have supper
- 18 Temple leader
- 19 ___ into;
- penetrate
- 20 Alliance
- 22 Like a leaky fountain pen
- 23 Roller coaster or carousel
- 24 Yuletide drink
- 26 Devious plan
- 29 Skinniest
- 34 Get rid of, as a written word
- 35 Pigs and hogs
- 36 Cow's remark
- 37 Dad's sister
- 38 Sweet glaze
- 39 Gray wolf
- 40 Name for 13 popes
- 41 Get on one's feet
- 42 Inn
- 43 Raincoats
- 45 Finch and Falk
- 46 Hearing organ
- 47 Homer and Marge's boy
- 48 Long story
- 51 Like a sponge
- 56 Runs up a tab
- 57 Implied, though not spoken
- 58 Sand ridge
- 60 "Penny ___"; Beatles song
- 61 Jagged
- 62 12 months
- 63 Recolors
- 64 Stitched
- 65 Arid

1	2	3		4	5	6	7	8		9	10	11	12
13			14		15					16			
17					18					19			
	20			21						22			
			23				24	25					
26	27	28				29	30			31	32	33	
34					35					36			
37					38					39			
40				41					42				
43			44					45					
		46					47						
48	49	50			51	52	53			54	55		
56					57					58		59	
60					61					62			
63					64					65			

Created by Jacqueline E. Mathews

12/19/13

Wednesday's Puzzle Solved

STORE	AJAR	UNDO
LINEN	NONE	NERD
ERECT	NETS	AVID
DESIROUS	UNWELL	
TEAL	CLEARLY	
APPEAR	SITAR	
SAO	TEMPT	TEACH
EINS	DALES	SILO
ANGEL	RISER	DUO
COMET	ROUSED	
MISUSES	LUMP	
ADORED	CAMPBELL	
LIFE	ASAP	EEERIE
TOIL	LEIS	RAGES
STAY	SANE	STOUT

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12/19/13

- 4 Walk with long steps
- 5 Outraged
- 6 Mongolian desert
- 7 Vagabond
- 8 Twirling
- 9 Plaid or paisley
- 10 Kiln
- 11 Quick look
- 12 Catch sight of
- 14 Closest
- 21 Green citrus
- 25 1/4 and 3/4
- 26 Closes tightly
- 27 Sadistic
- 28 Capital of Vietnam
- 29 Look-alikes
- 30 Female red deer
- 31 Shed crocodile tears
- 32 Not intoxicated
- 33 Hammer & saw
- 35 Mark left after surgery
- 38 Repeats
- 39 Random drawing
- 41 Music from Jamaica
- 42 Sage or thyme
- 44 Stops
- 45 Divided
- 47 Idaho's capital
- 48 Cry from an auctioneer
- 49 Go ___; leave
- 50 Cowboy Autry
- 52 Uncovered
- 53 Large flat-bottomed boat
- 54 Require
- 55 Drop of sorrow
- 59 Cook in oil

Ford warning on pricing, profit margins hits stock

Continued from Page 25

Shares of General Motors also dropped 3.5 percent, a sign that investors think the sharp sales gains and big profit increases for Detroit have hit a roadblock. Honda and Toyota shares, however, were up. Ford said its North American sales likely will be lower next year as it rolls out 16 new models. The company said it will have to discount older models as it transitions to new ones. It also expects continued tough price competition, especially in small and midsize cars, due in part to Japanese automakers taking advantage of a weaker yen versus the dollar. "Costs associated with this product growth will increase next year as well," Ford said in a statement. Ford was near collapse in 2006 when it hired CEO Alan Mulally away from aviation giant Boeing. Almost immediately, the company borrowed \$23.6 billion to make it through the recession. It shed unprofitable brands, closed plants and invested in new cars and trucks that are sold worldwide. Now it's making billions. But uncertainty about Mulally's future has put a damper on the stock. He's reportedly in the running to become Microsoft's CEO, but a decision won't come until early next year, according to the technology company's board. The combination of events sent Ford's stock down \$1.16, or 7 percent, to \$15.54 on Wednesday afternoon. Previously, the stock had risen almost 30 percent this year. But Ford shares sank as low as \$15.17 in the morning, the lowest price since \$15.10 on June 26. They have traded in a range from

\$11.47 to \$18.02 in the past year.

Also giving investors pause was Shanks' warning that Ford could fall short of earlier guidance of 10 percent operating profit margin in North America this year because of a large recall of Ford Escape small SUVs with 1.6-liter engines. It now expects the margin — the percentage of revenue it gets to keep — to be 9.5 to 10 percent. Costs from the recall will be \$250 million to \$300 million.

Before the recession, competitors typically would get far higher prices for their cars than Ford, but Ford has eliminated that gap now, Shanks told the analysts. That means future increases likely have to come from introducing new models or getting buyers to add options, Shanks said.

He also expects South American and Asia-Pacific profits to be flat in 2014. In South America, a major devaluation of currency in Venezuela will offset better profits in Brazil and Argentina. Costs of building new factories in China and India and charges for ending manufacturing in Australia will hold profits flat in Asia-Pacific, the company said, although Shanks emphasized that 2013 was a record year.

In Europe, Ford is still on track to be profitable in 2015, Shanks said. But it expects about \$400 million in restructuring costs this year and next to be a drag on profits. Ford also said its prediction of an 8- to 9-percent operating margin by mid-decade is at risk because the European downturn and conditions in South America were not expected when the outlook was released in 2011. □

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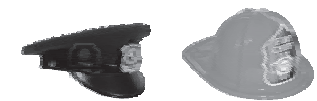
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POLIS TIPLINE	11141
HOSPITAL	527-4000
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Feds joins battle on citrus disease

By **TAMARA LUSH**
Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) -- The federal government is getting involved in the fight against citrus greening disease, in hopes of saving Florida's - and possibly the entire nation's - citrus crop. The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced

Thursday that it's creating an "emergency response framework" to battle citrus greening. It will gather various groups, agencies and experts to coordinate and focus federal research on fighting the disease. "We really need to be coordinating more effectively within the USDA and more

Warm November set month's heat record for planet



A dead orange tree stands at the beginning of in a grove in Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013, in Plant City, Fla.

MARCIA DUNN
AP Aerospace Writer
CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida (AP) — November was a hot month for planet Earth. Government scientists reported Tuesday that last month set a heat record. They say it was the warmest November on record, across Earth, since record-keeping began in 1880. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration says average global temperature, for water and land surfaces combined, was 56.6 degrees (13.7 Celsius). That's 1.4 degrees (0.78 degrees Cel-

sus) above the 20th century average. It was the 37th consecutive November with above-average temperatures. The last below-average November was in 1976. It was also the 345th straight month with above-average temperatures. That's almost 29 years. Among the November hot spots: much of Eurasia, Central America and the Indian Ocean. In Russia, it was the warmest November on record. But parts of North America were cooler than average. □



An orange blossom grows alongside some ripening fruit in a grove in Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013, in Plant City, Fla. The citrus industry in 2012 contributed \$1.5 billion to the Florida economy. Growers are worried about citrus greening, a condition where an insect causes bacteria to grow on the leaf and fruit, eventually killing the tree.

Associated Press

importantly, with the citrus industry and state and local officials," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. He added that since he came into office in 2009, the agency has spent nearly \$250 million on researching and tracking the disease. The citrus greening bacteria, which is spread by an insect, causes trees to produce green, disfigured and bitter fruits by altering nutrient flow to the tree, eventually killing it. It threatens Florida's \$9 billion citrus industry. Growers and scientists suspect that many of Florida's 69 million citrus trees are infected, with some estimates as high as 75 percent. This year's orange crop is expected to be the smallest in 24 years, largely due to greening. "If we don't find a cure soon, we won't be growing oranges in Florida much longer," Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said. The new USDA group will help coordinate and prioritize federal research with the industry's efforts to combat the disease. The USDA will also provide \$1 million to support re-

search projects and will launch a new section on its website about greening that will serve as an information clearinghouse. It's especially important in Florida, where the state's famous orange crop is a big part of the economy, culture and history. "We're treating this almost like a hurricane response," said Kevin Shea, the administrator for the USDA's animal and plant health inspection service. "The future of the citrus industry is at stake." Florida's orange crop had \$1.5 billion in sales in 2012, up from \$1.3 billion the previous year. Citrus growers gave Florida 66 percent of the total U.S. market share. About 95 percent of the state's orange crop is used for juice. Total citrus acreage is down 2 percent from the previous survey and the lowest since 1966. "This announcement really addresses the urgency of the current problem of greening," said Mike Sparks, CEO of the Lakeland, Fla.-based Florida Citrus Mutual. "This new initia-

tive announced by Secretary Vilsack could not have come at a better time." The disease is transmitted by the Asian citrus psyllid. It's also known as HLB, or, in Chinese, Huanglongbing. The disease was first spotted in 2005 in South Florida and quickly spread throughout the citrus growing region. Greening isn't just an issue in Florida. California is the country's biggest supplier of fresh-market oranges, and its 285,000 acre-citrus industry is second only to Florida, according to California Citrus Mutual. California has seen one affected orange tree, in a Los Angeles County backyard. Citrus experts on the West Coast said they are thankful that the federal government is devoting time and money to the problem. "Our objective is to make sure USDA looks at this situation with the urgency we think this deserves," said Joel Nelson, president of California Citrus Mutual in Exeter, Calif. "This is a very good move on their part." □

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Official: No mechanical issues in Walker car crash

JUSTIN PRITCHARD

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Investigators have found no evidence that the Porsche carrying “Fast & Furious” actor Paul Walker had mechanical problems before it crashed.

A law enforcement official with knowledge of the investigation tells The Associated Press the car lost control due to “speed, and speed alone.”

The official requested anonymity because the official was not authorized to

speak publicly.

The investigation also ruled out debris in the roadway as causing the car in which Walker was a passenger to smash into a light pole and tree. The Nov. 30 crash killed Walker and the driver, his friend and financial adviser Roger Rodas.

Investigators won't set a firm speed at which they think the car was traveling until Porsche engineers come to California next month to extract information from on-board data collectors. □

Tyler Perry says Fincher is ‘amazing’ director



This Oct. 18, 2012 file photo shows Tyler Perry at a screening of “Alex Cross” in New York.

Associated Press

ALICIA RANCILIO

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Tyler Perry writes, directs, stars in and produces his own movies and TV shows, so he doesn't have much time for outside projects. One he's glad he made work is a role in director David Fincher's upcoming film, “Gone Girl.”

Based on the best-selling novel by Gillian Flynn, “Gone Girl” is the story of a man who comes under suspicion in the disappearance of his wife. The movie, scheduled for release next October, stars Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike.

“Gone Girl” is “the most educational, awe-inspiring thing that I've ever done,” Perry said in a recent in-

terview. “Sitting in his presence, in his genius, the man is a genius,” he said of Fincher. “It really makes me go, ‘Whoa, let me just stop and take this in,’ so it's been wonderful.”

And, as one filmmaker to another, he's humbled by working with the Oscar-nominated director.

“I'm a storyteller. That man is a di-re-ctor. He is amazing. And to watch him work and to watch how he paints his pictures, the tableaux, everything is really just beyond anything I could ever imagine.”

Perry plays Madea, a big and boisterous grandmother he's made popular in previous movies, in “Tyler Perry's A Madea Christmas,” now in theaters. □

Joaquin Phoenix reboots in the movie ‘Her’

JAKE COYLE

AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Reporters have been conditioned to brace for Joaquin Phoenix. He's reputed to be volatile, evasive and guarded — an all-around difficult person to interview.

But after Phoenix, with his shoulder-length hair pulled back, strides energetically into a hotel room and begins chain-smoking American Spirits (despite a cold and plans to quit), that reputation — stoked considerably by his fake documentary “I'm Still Here” — quickly disintegrates.

Though the making of that film about his supposed exit from acting (and the infamous David Letterman appearance) was a public-relations debacle for the 37-year-old Phoenix, it also rejuvenated him as an actor: an intentional bid to tear everything down so he could build it back up.

“Once you've experienced a thrashing and failure — even if it's self-imposed — you have a choice: You can let it be the end, or you can fight to come back,” says Phoenix. “To suddenly be in this position where you have to prove yourself again, I thought, was really good and something that I needed.”

Four films later, the reckless experiment appears to have worked remarkably well. Phoenix has responded with the best run of his career.

He's made two films with Paul Thomas Anderson, having just finished shooting “Inherent Vice,” an adaptation of Thomas Pynchon's detective novel. The first, “The Master,” in which Phoenix played a restless, feral World War II veteran, was perhaps his best performance ever — the wanderings of a confused, uncontrollable man in postwar America. In James Gray's not-yet-released but also enthralling “The Immigrant,” he plays a New York man who preys on immigrants com-



This Nov. 10, 2013 file photo shows actor Joaquin Phoenix during a photo call for the movie “Her” at the 8th edition of the Rome International Film Festival in Rome.

Associated Press

ing through Ellis Island.

And now he stars as Theodore Twombly in Spike Jonze's “Her,” a romance that begins with a futuristic high concept but morphs into a sweet exploration on the nature of love. Twombly, who lives in a sleek, cushy near-future Los Angeles (Jonze used Shanghai's skyline), falls for his highly intelligent, Siri-like computer operating system, voiced by Scarlett Johansson.

Whereas Phoenix's Freddie Quell in “The Master” was wild and isolated, Theodore is gentle, open and soulful.

“All of those things exist in me,” says Phoenix.

The multitudes in Phoenix and his quick-shifting moods have made him famously unpredictable. It's also made him an exceptional actor, one particularly bent on both inhibition and total vulnerability. Talking to him, at least on one recent December day, revealed a warm, affable and playful guy — someone a lot more like Theodore than you'd expect.

“I had this other image of him,” says Jonze. “Some of that — and maybe a lot of that — is because he doesn't care. He's not trying to present an image. He's not trying to sell anything. And he'd be dreadfully uncomfortable if he was trying to sell anything.” Jonze first met Phoenix

when the actor read for a part in his “Adaptation.” that eventually went to Chris Cooper.

“He came in and he was like, ‘I'm the worst. I'm terrible. This is going to be terrible. You don't want to even cast me in this, and you definitely don't want to see me read,’” recalls Jonze.

The modesty doesn't appear false. Phoenix's conversation is filled with a reluctance to state anything too certainly, even about himself.

He often disagrees with things he's said before: “Sometimes you say things to the press ... and you're stuck with it forever.”

The middle child of five from a transient, bohemian family that settled in California, Phoenix knew from a young age that he loved acting. Like his siblings, he was a child actor, which he recalls as a pure kind of acting. He's driven to go back to that childlike feeling of fully believing a scene's reality: “I only want to experience that,” he says.

But the idea that Phoenix, who typically has cast and crew members call him by his character's name on the set, is obsessed with “staying in the moment” is also a misconception, he says.

“It's not a science to me and I don't want it to be,” says Phoenix. □

The AP picks its Top 10 theater of 2013

MARK KENNEDY
AP Drama Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — This year's best-in-theater list is overstuffed: There are revolting children, classic plays and circus acrobats. There are two knights playing two clowns and plenty of cross-dressers, as well as a guy in a one-man show, which somehow also features Barbra Streisand. Even a production that never actually made it onstage gets some applause. What? Our Top 10 list of the best in theater in 2013:

1. "The Glass Menagerie": There's magic from start to finish in this new production of Tennessee William's great play about regret starring a superb Cherry Jones and a revelatory Zachary Quinto. It's evocative, sometimes surreal and sublimely organic — the perfect package for a play about faded and frayed memories.

2. "Pippin": The revival of the Stephen Schwartz musical led by director Diane Paulus packs plenty of bang, lots of flips and real value for your money: A ticket buys you not just a musical but also a trip to the circus. There are fire jugglers, teeterboards, knife throwing and contortionists, as well as Bob Fosse-style dancing and great performances.

3. "Matilda": Great sets,

choreography and songs make this British import hard to resist. Music and lyrics by Tim Minchin stick with you — especially "Miracle," "Telly," "When I Grow Up" and "The Smell of Rebellion" — and the whole show thrillingly reminds you of the darkness of being a kid.

4. "Kinky Boots": The new Tony Award musical winner with infectious songs by Cyndi Lauper and a sloppy kiss of a story by Harvey Fierstein is unabashedly sentimental, with a classic message of acceptance. Billy Porter, as the drag queen at its heart, can make tears fall down your cheeks and he's sticking with the show into 2014.

5. "The Sound of Music": This Carrie Underwood-led show was on TV, of course, but Broadway was in its DNA, from the supporting cast — Christian Borle, Laura Benanti and Audra McDonald — to co-director Rob Ashford. It was the first full-scale musical staged live for television in more than a half-century and drew an impressive 18.6 million viewers. (By way of comparison, total attendances for all of Broadway last season was 11.6 million). It was simply a brilliant advertisement for live theater.

6. "The Last Five Years": A revival of Jason Robert Brown's song cycle about

a troubled marriage was a highlight of Second Stage Theatre's last season. But if you missed it, look out for a movie version soon with "Smash" star Jeremy Jordan and Anna Kendrick from "Up in the Air." It's

young man, who is, in fact, a young woman in disguise, is a pure delight.

8. Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Harold Pinter's "No Man's Land" may not be your double cup of existential tea, but

one but Streisand goes to. Over 100 minutes, Urie plays out more than 30 scenes in which his character has a fraught tango with the fictional Babs. It's moving and sweet and funny. Urie also helped the off-Broadway one-man show do something few can boast: recoup.

10. The look of "Macbeth:" The acting led by Ethan Hawke may be uneven, the addition of creatures that look like rejects from "Cats" is unfortunate and the use of three scenery chewing men to play the Three Witches breaks the spell, but there's no denying this is the most handsome show on Broadway. Scott Pask's sets include giant moveable slabs, a vase of flowers that suddenly loses its petals and a bright, airy, leaf-covered canopy. Japhy Weideman's stunning lighting turns everyone into rock gods. And Catherine Zuber's timeless, ultra-sexy costumes make everyone gorgeous.

Honorable Mention: "Fun Home": A rich, clever and moving musical adapted by the playwright Lisa Kron and the composer Jeanine Tesori from Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir about growing up with a gay dad. This show at the Public Theater is refreshing and intimate and satisfying. □



This theater image released by Jeffrey Richards Associates shows Cherry Jones, left, and Zachary Quinto during a performance of "The Glass Menagerie." There's magic from start to finish in this new production of Tennessee William's great play about regret starring a superb Cherry Jones and a revelatory Zachary Quinto. It's evocative, sometimes surreal and sublimely organic — the perfect package for a play about faded and frayed memories.

Associated Press

good to see this fabulous show get another bout of attention.

7. Mark Rylance as the white-faced and trembling noblewoman Olivia in "Twelfth Night." Rylance, sharing his Shakespearian skills on Broadway for the first time, is also playing the evil title monarch in "Richard III" in repertory, but seeing his Olivia get unglued in the presence of a

watching Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart at the top of their game make these the definite versions to see, despite the obtuseness and angst. You'll be applauding loudly even while scratching your head.

9. "Buyer & Cellar:" Michael Urie plays a struggling actor who goes to work for Barbra Streisand as a clerk in her underground mall of quaint shops, which no



This image released by CBS shows Lucille Ball, center, dressed as Santa Claus in a colorized "I Love Lucy Christmas Special" airing on Friday, Dec. 20, on CBS.

Associated Press

LYNN ELBER

AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Lucille Ball's classic antics are colorized in an "I Love Lucy" holiday special airing on CBS. But daughter Lucie Arnaz's vivid family

Christmas memories don't require any embellishment to shine. Arnaz says her parents, Ball and Desi Arnaz, made the most of the holiday at their Beverly Hills home in the 1950s. Arnaz and her brother, Desi Ar-

Lucie Arnaz recalls Christmas with Lucy, Desi

naz Jr., reveled in it. "It was the only time of the year when there wasn't stress," recalled Arnaz, an actress-singer who tours nationally in concert. "There was a lot of stress because of how hard they worked, and their marriage wasn't doing well. But Christmas was always a good time." Ball made their Beverly Hills house elegant, Arnaz said. "My mother loved the East Coast so she tried to bring it to Beverly Hills. We always had a flocked white tree with blue lights. At night, it made it look like wintertime in the snow," Arnaz said. Her Cuban-born dad added a memorable touch one particular Christmas

Eve. Young Lucie awoke to the sound of clattering on the roof, followed by a man in a red suit bringing gifts into her room.

As Arnaz recalls: "He bent over and kissed me and said" — here she adapts a Cuban accent — "'Merry Christmas!' I thought, 'Santa sounds just like daddy.'" Years later, Ball confirmed the memory. "Yes, he did that," she told her daughter. "He got all liquored up and banged on the roof and got in his Santa suit with the presents and the whole thing. And then he had to open his mouth."

Lucie Arnaz, 62, said she was about 7 when her parents split up, and she and

her brother then had two holidays: one at the Beverly Hills home with Ball and then a Cuban version at Arnaz's thoroughbred horse ranch east of Los Angeles, complete with a roasted pig. She fondly recalls watching her parents on the set of "I Love Lucy," and hopes the "I Love Lucy Christmas Special" (8 p.m. EST Friday, CBS) will introduce the sitcom to a new generation of viewers. The hour-long program includes colorized versions of a Christmas special and one in which Lucy memorably stomps grapes for wine in Italy. A newly released DVD includes those and a third episode, "Lucy Goes to Scotland." □

Upon This Burger



FRANK BRUNI

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LOS ANGELES - Just five years ago, Adam Fleischman was in a two-bedroom rental with his wife and their 1-year-old son, fumbling around for a career that might stick. Screenwriting hadn't worked out. Same for finance. He was 38 and, he told me, "It was do or die."

Today he owns two houses here, one with six bedrooms and a makeshift vineyard out back. He said that he's toying with the idea of a third in London. He has stakes in multiple businesses and plans for more. All because of a burger.

In February 2009, with about \$40,000, he opened a 30-seat restaurant on La Brea Avenue named Umami Burger. Its signature was a 6-ounce patty of coarsely ground, loosely packed, steak-quality beef that had been seasoned just so and was served on a soft, Portuguese-style roll. It cost \$8. You ordered it at a table, and could have booze.

Within about a year, there were four Umami Burgers around Los Angeles. Now there are 20 in California and one each in Miami and New York, with many more to come. Fleischman projected that Umami Burger's revenues for 2013 would be about \$50 million. And the burger itself, with a current price tag of \$12, has been exhaustively analyzed and justly celebrated.

But what of the enterprise? What secrets does it yield?

Most attention to the inventive stars of the ceaselessly expanding culinary world focuses on what they've done in the kitchen, not on their shrewdness as businesspeople. I turned to Fleischman for the lessons beyond the bun.

With Umami Burger, he demonstrated that a seemingly saturated market sometimes harbors unoccupied niches, unmet needs. While you could get venerated burgers in plenty of fast-food joints and in many upscale restaurants that did fancy riffs, it wasn't as easy to find a carefully made, determinedly original burger at a casual place with prices and a style of service between those poles.

And few casual places devoted themselves as wholeheartedly to burgers as he decided to.

Fleischman specialized, recognizing that there'd be distinction - and a promise of expertise - in that. Let other menus be tempted down unrelated alleyways. His concentrated al-

most exclusively on a variety of burgers and a variety of accoutrements.

He turned constraint into virtue. During his initial expansion, he didn't have the budget to give the different Umami Burgers a consistent design. So he let each look entirely unlike the others, thus communicating that Umami wasn't any old chain. It had a more elevated, independent spirit.

This was just one of many ways in which he tapped into the moment and the sensibilities of the customers he was after. Like other food-industry entrepreneurs, he appreciated that young diners of limited means craved distinctive restaurant experiences every bit as much as older, wealthier people did, and that they would eagerly channel that hunger toward the likes of pork buns, tacos, even doughnuts.

But he pulled off an even more precise mind meld with his potential audience, realizing that they also wanted to feel adventurous, erudite. His restaurant's name and concept indulged their desired sophistication. Umami was familiar principally to food insiders as the "fifth taste," first defined in Japan, a savory deliciousness apart from salty, bitter, sweet and sour. To incorporate it into patties, Fleischman used a special powder that smacked intentionally of advanced culinary science, and it, along with other splashes and accessories for the burgers, brought a wide world of ingredients into play: shiitake, porcini, Parmesan, miso, soy sauce, fish sauce, kelp.

He even gave each burger a tidy architecture and plenty of color and served it alone on white china, the better to be photographed for Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. "It was conceived as a brand," he said, "and as a brand that reflected the present day."

Fleischman clearly understood what most successful purveyors of cars, clothing and cosmetics have also appreciated. He was selling customers more than a product. He was selling them an identity. As surely as he was feeding them, he was flattering them.

But when I asked him for the most important takeaway from his story, he mentioned something else - passion - and the fact the he had finally embraced an endeavor fully reflective of his most profound obsession, which was flavor.

"Do a business that you can't live without, that you're not going to be able to sleep at night if you don't do," he said.

He meant that as a practical matter. Passion gave him the energy for the 18-hour days that were necessary during that first, whirlwind year.

And without passion in the creation of a business, he said, there's not likely to be passion in the reception of it. People can sense whether you're going through the paces or going for something better, something novel. It's not dollars they want to hand over; it's devotion. You just have to give them sufficiently juicy cause. □



The Thought Leader



DAVID BROOKS

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Little boys and girls in ancient Athens grew up wanting to be philosophers. In Renaissance Florence they dreamed of becoming humanists. But now a new phrase and a new intellectual paragon has emerged to command our admiration: The Thought Leader.

The Thought Leader is sort of a highflying, good-doing yacht-to-yacht concept peddler. Each year, he gets to speak at the Clinton Global Initiative, where successful people gather to express compassion for those not invited. Month after month, he gets to be a discussion facilitator at think tank dinners where guests talk about what it's like to live in poverty while the wait staff glides through the room thinking bitter thoughts.

He doesn't have students, but he does have clients. He doesn't have dark nights of the soul, but his eyes blaze at the echo of the words "breakout session." Many people wonder how they too can become Thought Leaders and what the life cycle of one looks like.

In fact, the calling usually starts young. As a college student, the future Thought Leader is bathed in attention. His college application essay, "I Went to Panama to Teach the Natives About Math but They Ended Up Teaching Me About Life," is widely praised by guidance

counselors. On campus he finds himself enmeshed in a new social contract: Young people provide their middle-aged professors with optimism and flattery, and the professors provide them with grade inflation. He is widely recognized for his concern for humanity. (He spends spring break unicycling across Thailand while reading to lepers.)

Not armed with fascinating ideas but with the desire to have some, he launches off into the great struggle for attention. At first his prose is upbeat and smarmy, with a peppy faux sincerity associated with professional cheerleading.

Within a few years, though, his mood has shifted from smarm to snark. There is no writer so obscure as a 26-year-old writer. So he is suddenly consumed by ambition anxiety - the desperate need to prove that he is superior in sensibility to people who are superior to him in status. Soon he will be writing blog posts marked by coruscating contempt for extremely anodyne people: "Kelly Clarkson: Satan or Merely His Spawn?"

Of course the writer in this unjustly obscure phase will develop the rabid art of being condescending from below. Of course he will confuse his verbal dexterity for moral superiority. Of course he will seek to establish his edgy in-group identity by trying to prove that he was never really that into Macklemore. Fortunately, this snarky phase doesn't last. By his late 20s, he has taken a job he detests in a consulting firm, offering his colleagues strategy memos and sexual tension. By his early 30s, his soul has been so thoroughly crushed he's incapable of thinking outside of consultantese. It's not clear our Thought Leader started out believing he would write a book on the productivity gains made possible by improved electronic medical records, but having written such a book he can now travel

from medical conference to medical conference making presentations and enjoying the rewards of being TSA Pre.

By now the Thought Leader uses the word "space" a lot - as in, "Earlier in my career I spent a lot of time in the abject sycophancy space, but now I'm devoting more of my energies to the corporate responsibility space."

The middle-aged Thought Leader's life has hit equilibrium, composed of work, children and Bikram yoga. The desire to be snarky mysteriously vanishes with the birth of the first child. His prose has never been so lacking in irony and affect, just the clean translucence of selling out.

He's succeeding. Unfortunately, the happy moment when you are getting just the right amount of attention passes, and you don't realize you were in this moment until after it is gone.

The tragedy of middle-aged fame is that the fullest glare of attention comes just when a person is most acutely aware of his own mediocrity. By his late 50s, the Thought Leader is a lion of his industry, but he is bruised by snarky comments from new versions of his formerly jerkish self. Of course, this is when he utters his cries for civility and good manners, which are really just pleas for mercy to spare his tender spots.

In the end, though, a lifetime of bullet points are replaced by foreboding. Toward the end of his life the Thought Leader is regularly engaging in a phenomenon known as the powerless lunch. He and another formerly prominent person gather to have a portentous conversation of no importance whatsoever. In the fading of the light, he is gravely concerned about the way everything is going to hell.

Still, one rarely finds an octogenarian with status anxiety. He is beyond the battle for attention. Death approaches. Cruelly, it smells like reverence. □

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